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THE COMICS MAGAZINE • 147

FREE X-MEN COMIC!

WIZARD #150 IS COMING!

WIZARD

GIANT YEAR-END SPECIAL ISSUE!

ARTIST OF THE YEAR: JIM LEE

THE AUTHORITY (clockwise from left) The Doctor, Apollo, Swift and Midnighter

PLUS: WHO WINS? BEST HERO, VILLAIN, COMIC & MORE!

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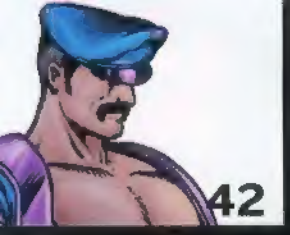

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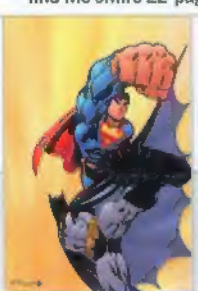

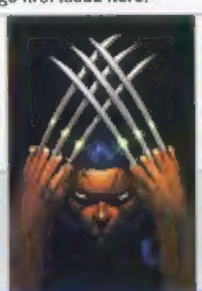

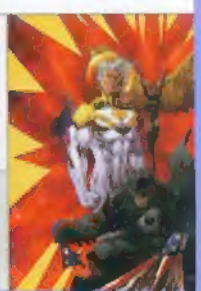

Superman/Batman (left) leads into our Michael Turner *Superman/Batman* #8 First Look on p. 38. **Wolverine (center)** sets the stage for our *New X-Men* #151 Preview on p. 92. **The Authority (right)** cover gives a big hint as to who's in our Best of 2003 feature on p. 70.

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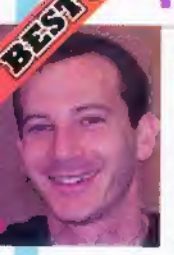

Can you believe another year has gone by already? 2003 flew past like a blur!

But it was another great year thanks to tons of great comic book projects and movies like "Daredevil," "Hulk" and "X-Men 2"—and as we do every year in our spectacular Year-End Edition, we run down the best comics had to offer.

And right now, you're probably wondering to yourself, "What goes into the process?" Normally, our crack editorial staff would lock itself in a giant steel cage and pummel one another with two-by-fours and garbage can lids until only one guy was standing with all his selections. But this year, we decided to make it a bit more democratic: The staff met and planned for over a month and debated till they were all blue in the face. Who's the Best Writer and Best Artist in comics? What title took home Best Book of the Year? What personality walked away with our coveted and inaugural Man of the Year award? I don't want to give anything away here; flip over to **page 70** to find out for yourself! And to make things easier on you, we've whipped up this handy "Best of 2003" icon for all our year-end coverage to make it easier to spot!

Ready to look back on the year that was 2003? Get to it already! And be ready to ring in 2004 with us next month!

Sincerely,

Gareb S. Shamus

BYTHENUMBERS...

4 Bowel movements Mark Millar took while being interviewed (see Q&A p. 54)

1 Masturbation reference made in the Millar Q&A (What is up with that guy?)

74 Hours needed to debate the Best of the Best 2003 feature

3 Near fist fights spawned by those "debates"

4 Times Associate Editor Alex Segura Jr. suggested he be nominated man of the year

18 Hours Mike Cotton conferred with Alan Moore for his career retrospective (p. 56)

3 Times Moore made reference to the "astral plane"

2 Times Cotton asked Moore where that airline flew to

11 Requests by Wizard staffers to Mike Turner to draw a nude Wonder Woman

5 Times Turner agreed as long as Staff Writer Richard Ho would model the outfit and tiara

15 Wizard staffers who saw "Kill Bill" on opening night

6 Plastic ninja-sword fights that broke out in the office the following Monday (Associate Editor Jesse Thompson [at right] nearly lost an eye!)

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY As Associate Editor Jesse Thompson learned the hard way, *this* is the result when cousins marry.

masthead

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!

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ENVELOPE ART

DALLIN BIRD, Laurel, MS

A coupla gay Justice Leaguers... Fans break silence on 'Hush'... and Avengers return to West Coast?

Mmmm...the holidays are around the corner, and the wonderful aroma of roast turkey and Magic Words is in the air.

And my, do you guys have questions, questions, questions. After a month dominated by *JLA/Avengers* debate, we're back to getting bags of letters filled to the brim with questions about every topic under the sun. And you better believe we'll devote some space to a little Bat-tale called "Hush."

But let's lead off with a letter or two about the gaiety of our favorite childhood heroes.

And by "gay," we don't mean "happy"...

Dear Wiz crew,

The craziest thing I've heard in my life was told to me today: While in Ethics class, my teacher said Batman was originally gay.

Now, Batman is my all-time fave, so for me this was quite a revelation! I've never read the original stories from the '30s, so I don't know where this assumption came from. Please get me the right answer so I can shove it up my teacher's @$$!

ERICK CRUZ
Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico

If you're so squeamish about Batman batting for the other team, maybe "shoving it up my teacher's @$$" ain't the best choice of words, huh?

Anyhoo, a quick run through the *Wizard* library failed to turn up anything queer from Bats' early days (other than those tights Robin frolicked around in). But just to be sure, we asked *Ruse* scribe and Bat-historian Scott Beatty for his take on the subject.

"Your teacher is mistaken," assures Beatty. "And I'd bet dollars to Batarangs that your teacher's assumption likely stems from all the Freudian hooey Dr. Fredric Wertham cast about in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*. Batman has had plenty of girlfriends over the years—Julie Madison, Vicki Vale, Silver St. Cloud, Vesper Fairchild and a certain feline fatale. Does Bruce's inability to maintain a long-term relationship with someone of the opposite sex mean that he swings the other way on his jumpline? Not in the least. In Batman's mind, nothing matters more than the war on crime, and he's reluctant to get close to anyone who might get caught in the crossfire."

But read on—we're not outta the closet yet!

Wizguys,

I am disappointed to find that Greg Rucka believes Themyscira should be a lesbian isle. Themyscira is a noble Amazon society. Not a bar by the interstate. They live without men because they choose to. Not because they could always get a piece from other Amazonians. Please don't destroy a comic book icon.

DAVID
Lacey, WA

I'm flabbergasted. A fanboy actually *complaining* about hot lesbians?

Mr. Rucka, your rebuttal, please.

"Themyscira is not a 'lesbian isle,'" insists the *Wonder Woman* scribe, "despite whatever Crete has been saying about her. Crete's problem is, of course, that Themyscira shot him

QUICKHITS

"Thanks for the great article on Dan DiDio [In *Wizard* #145]. It was interesting to find out more about the new "man behind the scenes" (and all the top creator hirings!) at DC."

JEFF COBURN
ORLEANS, VT

"Don't be surprised to see Cap take an active role in U.S. politics" [from *Wizard* #145]? Guess that means fewer half-decent stories and lots more left-wing agitprop. That sound you're hearing is Jack Kirby spinning in his grave.

SCOTT KNUDSEN
NEW YORK, NY

Just wondering why "Last Man Standing" was dropped from these sacred pages. It was like getting a mini-company crossover on a monthly basis.

TOM ZIMMERMAN
KALELZIMMERMAN@YAHOO.COM

When I first read that Thomas Jane had been cast as the Punisher, I didn't know what to think. I've since seen a picture of Thomas as the Punisher and WOW! He looks perfect.

JEFF COLE
MIDLAND, MI

Please get off Geoff Johns' n--s. He is not the second coming of Brian Michael Bendis. (By the way, get off his n--s, too.)

ZACH HARRISON
ZACHARYH527@AOL.COM

I want more Black Manta! Those Black Manta pieces [in *Wizard* Zero and #145] are hilarious!

QUAN WILLIAMS
FLINT, MI

Honestly, I could not have hoped for a better choice to play Batman than Christian Bale. He's better than Keaton, Kilmer or Clooney all put together.

CYCLOPS284@AOL.COM

Gotham Central is outstanding! I only wish DC would publish the book under the Vertigo label to give [Ed] Brubaker and [Michael] Lark even more freedom.

WAYNE GEORGE
WAYNEG@WEBMAIL.CO.ZA

I just had to say how obvious it is that *Wizard* is a lily-white publication. First, the lame 50 Cent parody in [*Wizard*] Zero and in #145, on p. 15, you refer to "D.H." Hughley (it's D.L.)!

JOE DOUGHRITY
BLKCOMICGUY@YAHOO.COM

What do you think of THIS issue? Let us know. Send an e-mail to: magicwords@wizarduniverse.com and be heard...er, read.

down when he was out drinking with Gibraltar and Bermuda last spring, and since then he's told everyone who'll listen that Themyscira is obviously gay—a typical straight male island response when rejected by an obviously attractive female island. When asked for comment, Themyscira's close friend, Atlantis, said, 'She's not gay; she simply has taste.'

"Easter Isle, however, *is* a 'lesbian isle,' and my understanding is that most of the Lesser Grenadines are, if not queer, at least 'bi-curious.'

"And Britain, well...that slut will sleep with anyone."

Hello Magic Words,
Marvel has MAX, Marvel Knights and the Ultimate line. So why not bring back the New Universe line? It was great! Titles like *D.P.7* and *Starbrand* were the sh--. Those stories were the greatest thing about the '80s. How 'bout an Ultimate New Universe? How 'bout a brief run in an *Exiles* story? I can't be the only one who feels this way. Come on, do it for Mark Gruenwald, don't let him be another forgotten dead writer! DON'T MAKE ME SEND THIS LETTER TIED TO A BRICK TO JOE QUESADA, VIA HIS WINDOW!!!

GABRIEL NICKELS
Chicago, IL

No knock on Mark Gruenwald (who will never be just "another forgotten dead writer"), but let's face it: These characters simply don't have the "oomph" to get readers hooked. A professional football player-turned-paranormal hero in a book called *Kickers, Inc.*? Please. The line was scrapped for a reason.

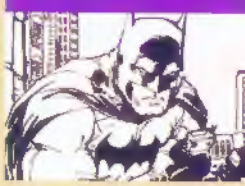
Besides, Quesada's office is on the 10th floor, so unless you're, like, the Hulk, you should probably leave the brick at home.

Dear Magic Words,
If "Hush" was done by any other artist, I don't think it would have sold nearly as well. The story was solid, if a little predictable at times, but even after Thomas Elliott "died" I kept my fingers crossed that Hush wasn't who I thought it was, unfortunately it was who I thought it was. The only positives are the repositioning of the Riddler and Harvey's new look; I hope that doesn't get reversed. Batman has enough villains, getting rid of one won't hurt.

RICHARD RENTERIA
Huntington Beach, CA

DIDJA KNOW?

Jim Lee's first Batman story was in *Batman: Gotham Knights* #1.



No one's more aware of the sales power of Jim Lee than his partner-in-crime Jeph Loeb. "We got asked this a lot during the run—would the book have sold as well without Jim?" admits the scribe. "I'd say no. But I feel that way about inker Scott Williams, colorist Alex Sinclair and letterer Richard Starkings. We were a team and I think it showed on the page. I wrote a story specifically tailored to Jim's strengths (as I see them) and he not only met the challenge, I think he blew it all out of the park. Folks got caught up in the story—and that was really exciting for all of us."

And the Riddler? As the following fan writes, it's about time he took a seat at the big kids' table.

Hello Oh Wise Wizards,
The question on the plate today is did "Hush" deliver? I will say that it did in many ways. It brought the Riddler to the

front of things without tying him to that goofy "Batman Forever" movie. It kept us guessing as to who the real Hush was at nearly every turn. However, it did leave us with a few unanswered questions as well, I'm afraid. Questions like: Where is Tommy's body? Where are Jason Todd's remains? Those are the loose-end questions that need to be made clear sooner than later. But the bigger question is: What's going to happen with Batman and Catwoman? That's one question that can be teased about for some time and see where it takes them.

Hush indeed delivered in the story department, and in the art department as well! Jim Lee's Batman is some of the best I've ever seen! I can't wait to see what Jim and Jeph do next. Tell them they have my thumbs up!

MARK DRIESBACH
Jim Thorpe, PA

Tell them we did, and both Loeb and Lee appreciate the props. "Thank you for the kind words!" says Lee. "It's the passion and enthusiasm of fans like you that makes working in comics as fun and enjoyable as it is. Which is more important than one would guess, in the wee hours of the night when you're struggling to stay awake to make a deadline!"

Hey Magic Words,

This is in regard to why exactly you guys can't get off of Ultimate Wolverine. You talked in a previous issue about how "badass" he is. Well, here we go:

1) He dropped his teammate, Cyclops, off of a cliff to try and win the heart of Jean Grey. If he was really such a "badass," he would have dueled it out with Cyclops, not dropped him off of a cliff. That's what a *coward* does. Not to mention when he *did* get the chance to go man to man with Cyclops, it took one optic blast and he went down like a sack of potatoes.

2) His "attack" on Magneto was incredibly short-lived, and don't use the adamantium excuse. Colossus got up and smacked Magneto around—why can't Wolverine?

3) He got taken out by a chick with a gun. You remember when you were a kid and one of your biggest fears was getting beaten up by a girl? Well, it happened to him. On top of that, he would be dead if it wasn't for Daredevil coming in and saving the day. Now *that's* a cool guy. Needless to say, I think your saying that Ultimate Wolverine is a "badass" is incorrect and he should be stripped of that title.

J
Chattanooga, TN

Despite my history of hiding in basements and getting beaten up by girls, I still consider myself to be something of a badass. So in defense of Ultimate Wolverine, I say this:

There's nothing wrong with dropping Cyclops off a cliff.

Dearest Wizard,

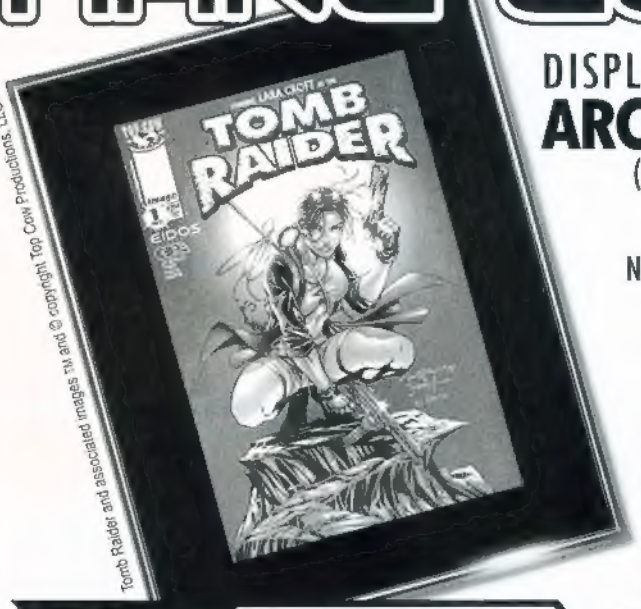
Do you want to know the one thing that chaps my buttocks in the comic world? No? Too bad.

One phrase has become my Kryptonite, my young ward that was killed by my archenemy, my alien symbiote from another planet that knows my secret identity (you get the picture, it's a bad thing). The two most useless words on the planet:'Nuff said.

'Nuff said? What kind of crap is that? Batman vs. Joker—'Nuff said! Spidey vs. Venom—'Nuff said! Transformers vs. The Powerpuff Girls—'Nuff said!

That's not 'nuff for me! It's not even proper grammar. Just because it's two big time guys fighting each other for the bazillionth time, the fans don't need a catchy phrase on the cover? It's

HANG COMICS



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JAILMAIL

Dear Wizard,

Thank you so much for your new feature "Jail Mail." It's a troubling thought to know so many who were enthralled by the comic book adventures of superheroes ended up behind bars. Instead of truth, justice and the American way, we end up being more Lex Luthor than Superman.

Thanks to Mr. Shamus and his wonderful magazine, I am able to keep up with my beloved heroes.

I wonder why comic creators don't create a character of a hero that wields justice from behind bars. Say a former CIA operative who's wrongfully accused, but finds his calling by becoming a masked vigilante who patrols the prison at night. Battling gang warfare, drug dealers and sodomites. He could be called the Key-Man. Who knows, those with input on the idea could write me, and we could create a new character.

"Key-Man. Saving lives while doing life."

Respectfully,

BEN CASTRO 106042
Phelps Correctional Center IA
P.O. Box 1056
DeQuincy, LA 70633

Brilliant. Criminally brilliant.

like having an X-Men comic with Jean Grey holding Cyclops' decapitated head on the cover and it says, "'Nuff said." We know this issue is going to kick ass and we know the story will be explained. You should only say "'Nuff said" if you don't plan on saying anything about it! And if that ever happens it will be the end of comics as we know it!

Something has to be said! Please tell me that you can use your powers for good once instead of evil and ensure me that these devil words shall never haunt me again. Thank you.

ANDY DURAN
duran4680@hotmail.com

'Nuff said.

Dudes,

I) Dr. Strange is the man. I pick books up whenever he's around in them. Rumors have it there is a new ongoing coming up somewhere. Are they true? And please tell me the art will be magnificent if it is so.

2) Will we ever see anything like the West Coast Avengers again? Outside of Thor, I have never caught on with any of the main Avengers. But I would love to see much more of Firestar, Hercules, Scarlet Witch, etc.

JASON
Austin, TX

Dude,

I) Agreed. It takes a special kind of man to pull off the open collar & cape look of one Stephen Strange, M.D. But you better cherish his guest stints in *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Thor: Vikings* and *1602*. The long-planned *Dr. Strange* mini-series by J. Michael Straczynski has been plotted, but scripting is on hold as the busy scribe currently has *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Supreme Power* and the second season of the Showtime TV series "Jeremiah" on his plate (not to mention the still-unscheduled finale to *Rising Stars*). Which means you probably won't see JMS' Doc Strange until mid-2004 at the earliest.

2) Hell yeah! I've always had a soft spot for the heroes kickin' it on the west side. But according to *Avengers* editor Tom Brevoort, a new expansion to the left coast just ain't in the cards. "Sadly, the West Coast Avengers have slid off of the California shelf and fallen into the sea," laughs Brevoort. "Besides, what constitutes a West Coast team? Can they not go beyond the Mississippi? If a criminal escapes to the east, are they screwed? It just didn't work. We'll probably do other Avengers-related limited series and side projects, but as for an actual West Coast Avengers ongoing, it's probably not going to happen."

DIDJA KNOW?

Tigra was the first hero recruited by Hawkeye to join the W.C. Avengers.

How you doing, Wiz guys?

How much money does it take for you guys to hype a book? I got a case of Molson Canadian and fresh tuna; is that enough?

JOEY B
Hamilton, Canada

For a case of Molson, the most you get is me printing your letter. I'll be looking for that beer in the mail.

But you can keep the fish.

The bells are ringin', so let me sign off by wishing happy holidays to all—and when the new year dawns in a month, I fully expect a bagload o' new letters and questions under the tree.

Or at least a case of Molson Canadian.

Festively,

Richard Ho, ho, ho

Staff Writer Richard Ho would like to remind all fanboys that yes, there is a Santa Claus. Or at least a Hanukkah Harry.

Send your letters to:
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151 Wells Ave.
Congers, NY 10920

or e-mail us at:
magicwords@wizarduniverse.com

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(Please include your full name, address and phone number and be as detailed as possible.)

'IDENTITY' REVEALED

Top-secret project promises to shatter DC status quo

JLA EMERGENCY JLA meetings would often turn into mass stampedes when the cocktail weiners hit the buffet table.

After 12 months of tightly guarded secrecy, it's finally going public: DC's got a full-blown Crisis on its hands.

Starting in June, writer Brad Meltzer (*Green Arrow*) and artist Rags Morales (*Hawkman*) will unleash *Identity Crisis*, an epic seven-issue mini-series that DC claims will have lasting ramifications for its entire universe—and change the way readers look at its heroes and villains. In fact, the publisher is touting *Identity Crisis* as the most important event since Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' 1986 seminal classic, *Watchmen*.

Beyond this initial announcement, details remain top secret. But here's what we *do* know: Secret identities play a central role in *Identity Crisis*, and the story revolves around two mysteries—a devastating murder and a dark secret from the Justice League's past that's been hidden for years.

"It's a murder mystery set in the DC Universe," confirmed Meltzer, whose talent for capturing the human side of superheroes ensures that readers will be put through the emotional wringer. "People die, people suffer and people are changed by the time it's over. *Identity Crisis* is as much about the characters when the masks are off as when the masks are on."

Don't let the title fool you, however—*Identity Crisis* won't strive for the cosmic proportions of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. "The word 'Crisis' is obviously an important one in the DC Universe," explained *JLA* Editor Mike Carlin. "But this isn't a giant multi-title crossover. It stands alone—though the effects from the story *should* be followed up in the rest of the universe for the foreseeable future. This is like a reverse-*Crisis*. *Crisis* was about all the heroes on all the planets, while this is about the

DIDJA KNOW?

Brad Meltzer, Judd Winick and Ben Raab all attended the University of Michigan together.

The Vanisher vanishes!
Forgotten character realizes the predictive power of his own name... page 209

[illegible] visits dentist
Queen Mother reportedly "shocked and appalled"...page 214

people on *this* planet, and how the events of the story affect these heroes."

And when Carlin says heroes, he means *all* of them. The fallout from *Identity Crisis* will touch every hero in the DCU—most notably the classic lineup from the early years of the Justice League, including Green Arrow, Hawkman, Atom, Elongated Man, Zatanna and Black Canary. "Plus, every other character I could squeeze in there that I had something to say about!" laughs Meltzer.

That includes the families of heroes (rumor has it that the murder that sets the story in motion involves someone *very* close to the original Justice League), as well as a legion of DC villains (look for Meltzer to put a shocking spin on some of DC's most notorious baddies). "I'll let the villains speak for themselves," teased Meltzer. "Hopefully, people will be surprised."

THEY SAID IT...

"People die, people suffer and people are changed by the time it's over."

BRAD MELTZER, ON 'IDENTITY CRISIS'

For the talented team of Meltzer and Morales, an event of this scope has the potential to elevate the duo to superstar status. "Brad is already one of the top writers in comics," said Carlin. "When Dan DiDio came up with the idea to raise the ante for what's at stake in the DCU, I said, 'Brad's a great guy for this...and if we can give him the whole universe to play with, who knows how good it could be?' And we're really happy to have Rags Morales and [inker] Michael Bair onboard—the *Hawkman* stuff they've been doing for the last couple of years has been remarkable."

And for Morales, the chance to draw all of DC's icons was too good to pass up. "It's a dream come true," gushed the artist. "You get this real sense of, 'Wow! Now I'm in the driver's seat! I'm going to do this with the costume, and I'm going to do that to the spit curl!' When I was a kid, my favorite artists were at Marvel—but my favorite characters were all DC. Just to tackle those characters and add my little twist is an exciting prospect."

And the best part? Much about *Identity Crisis* remains unknown—and the air of mystery surrounding the project is sure to keep the fan frenzy simmering as June 2004 approaches. "People don't know that they're waiting for *Identity Crisis*—yet," laughed Carlin. "We've been having great success with *JLA/Avengers* because it's something that people have been waiting for for so many years, and Kurt [Busiek] and George [Perez] have really nailed what the fans want. *Identity Crisis* will be the same kind of thing, but it's going to be a surprise—and at the same time, it's going to be logical, and I think people are going to embrace it." ■ **RICHARD HO**

Meltz-ing Pot

Need proof that DC landed the perfect choice to craft their latest epic? Listen to fanboy-turned-novelist Brad Meltzer invoke his encyclopedic comic knowledge to count down his favorite DC stories of all time. "Let's agree that *Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* are No. 1 and 2, so we don't have to waste the space," laughed Meltzer. "They're still what we're all measured against. But here are the five after that!"

5 "Like I could pick *just* five. Here's what tied for fifth: Alan Moore's Mogo story in *Green Lantern*; Wolfman and Pérez on *Crisis*; *The Killing Joke*; 'The Great Darkness Saga' in *Legion*; *Camelot 3000* (you heard me—and I waited the year for the last issue); *Kingdom Come*; 'Who is Donna Troy?'; and of course, since Vertigo wasn't invented yet, Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*, which invented it."

4 Grant Morrison's run on *Animal Man* "Morrison used a second-tier character to slap us all across the face and wake us up to self-awareness and the fact that any hero could be done correctly, even B'wana Beast. And he made us love Buddy Baker's family, which is actually harder than the post-modern stuff."

3 *Justice League of America* (first series) #150 "The first comic I remember reading. I can still picture the splash page with all the JLA members trapped in Key prisons. I remember saying, 'How're they gonna get outta that one?' How? Elongated Man stretched himself into a treadmill and Flash ran them out, naturally. An addiction begins."

2 *New Teen Titans* "The Judas Contract" "In truth, this was the one that haunted my youth. So much so that I just finished an essay for an anthology on comics that talks about how Terra was the first girl who broke my heart. Laugh all you want, smart guy—it still holds up as the last great surprise in comics."

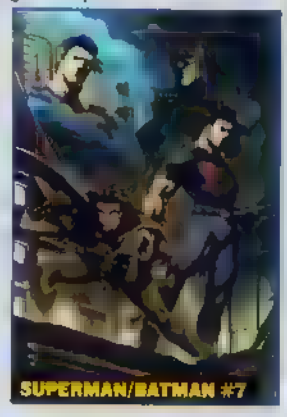
1 Alan Moore's "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?" "Alan Moore on Superman and no one has beaten him since. And the fact that he got Curt Swan to do it—with [George] Pérez and [Kurt] Schaffenberger inking—c'mon, who's gonna do it better? The last episode of 'M*A*S*H' for comics." ■ **RH**

THE BUZZ BIN

ULTIMATE LINE *Ultimates* writer Mark Millar says he's already got plans for another huge Ultimate line crossover, featuring everyone from the Ultimates to the Ultimate X-Men, Ultimate Spider-Man and lesser-seen Ultimate characters such as Ultimate Daredevil, Ultimate Punisher and Ultimate Elektra. The writer says the project is still in its infancy and planned for late 2004.

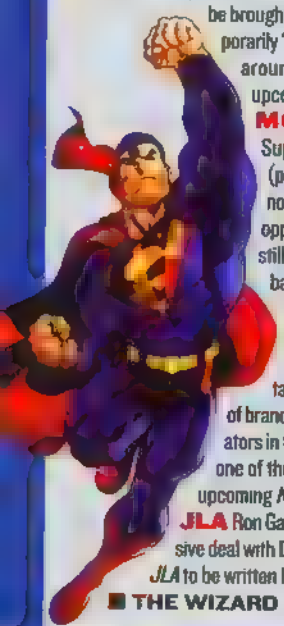
EPIC According to Marvel, the Epic line—originally created to find new writers and artists—has stopped accepting pitches. The House of Ideas stated that the overwhelming response to Epic was so great that the publisher needs time to catch up on reading all the new pitches as well as reviewing art samples.

PAT LEE With Michael Turner's *Superman/Batman* run kicking off with issue #8 (see p. 38), DC needed an artist to step in for one issue following Ed McGuinness' six-issue arc. Enter Pat Lee! The Dreamwave founder has signed on to provide pencils for a stand-alone story in *Superman/Batman* #7.



ORIGIN II The sequel to writer Paul Jenkins, artist Andy Kubert (p. 30) and colorist extraordinaire Richard Isanove's Wolverine origin tale may be closer than fans expect. According to rumors, a sequel could begin production as soon as Kubert finishes his current project, Neil Gaiman's *1602*.

SUPERMAN Big things are in store for the core Superman books, even *before* the big creatives changes hitting in April. Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning will write a three-part storyline running through the titles in January (*Action Comics* #811, *Adventures of Superman* #624 and *Superman* #201) that continues the story from December's *Superman* #200, which will find the Man of Steel disappearing at the end of the issue! The kicker? Mr. Majestic will be brought over from the WildStorm universe to temporarily "replace" Supes. DC plans to keep Majestic around and have him latch onto Joe Kelly's upcoming *JLA Elite* series.



MORE SUPERMAN Speaking of Superman, Talent Caldwell's six-issue story (penned by Michael Turner and Joe Kelly) is now scheduled to run in the regular titles, as opposed to a separate mini-series. The tale will still run weekly from February to March, with back-up stories in each issue by the upcoming new creative teams focusing on individual characters in the Superman mythos.

MARC SILVESTRI Top Cow is targeting the second half of 2004 for a slew of brand new projects with some of the hottest creators in the industry attached. But count on at least one of the projects to involve Top Cow founder and upcoming *New X-Men* artist Marc Silvestri.

JLA Ron Garney, who recently signed a two-year exclusive deal with DC, will draw an as-yet-unscheduled arc of *JLA* to be written by Chuck Austen (*Uncanny X-Men*).

■ THE WIZARD STAFF

G.I. JOE EMBARKS ON NEW CAMPAIGN

One-shots kick off Ultimate-style revamp

Devil's Due puts an ultimate battle plan to the test in 2004. The publisher will launch two one-shots that will not only redefine the Joe mythos, but reboot the Real American Heroes in a setting that's more "24" than "ThunderCats."

January's *Cobra: Reborn*, by writer Paul Jenkins (*Wolverine The End*) and artist Eddie Barrows (*G.I. Joe: Frontline*), and February's *G.I. Joe: Reborn*, by John Ney Reiber (*Captain America*) and Joe Bennett (*The Crew*), will bring fans in on the ground floor and present G.I. Joe's origins with a modern, real world feel. The one-shots, which feature covers by Tim Bradstreet (*Punisher*), will lead into *G.I. Joe: Reloaded*, a new ongoing series starting in March.

Combining big name creators with an Ultimate-style revamp was a no-brainer, says Devil's Due head honcho Josh Blaylock. "We wanted to start fresh and give it our own special flair," he explained.

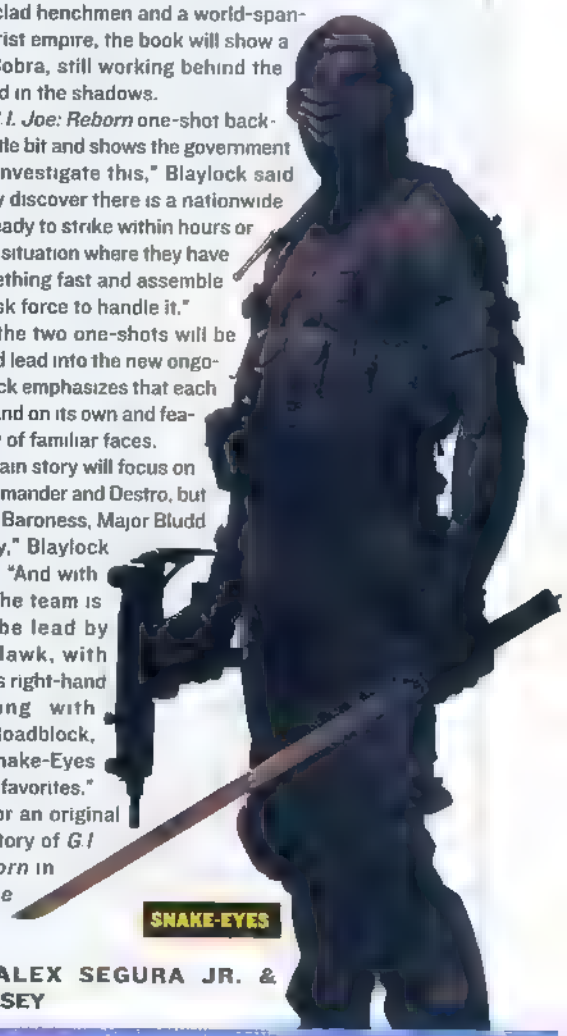
Cobra: Reborn places the spotlight on Cobra Commander as he plans a massive attack on the United States. Instead of costume-clad henchmen and a world-spanning terrorist empire, the book will show a nascent Cobra, still working behind the scenes and in the shadows.

"The *G.I. Joe: Reborn* one-shot backtracks a little bit and shows the government trying to investigate this," Blaylock said. "Then they discover there is a nationwide network ready to strike within hours or days. It's a situation where they have to do something fast and assemble an elite task force to handle it."

While the two one-shots will be related and lead into the new ongoing, Blaylock emphasizes that each tale will stand on its own and feature plenty of familiar faces.

"The main story will focus on Cobra Commander and Destro, but we see the Baroness, Major Bludd and Firefly," Blaylock described. "And with G.I. Joe, the team is going to be lead by Colonel Hawk, with Duke as his right-hand man, along with Scarlett, Roadblock, Stalker, Snake-Eyes and all the favorites."

Look for an original six-page story of *G.I. Joe: Reborn* in *ToyFare* #79, on sale Jan. 14! ■ ALEX SEGURA JR. & TODD CASEY

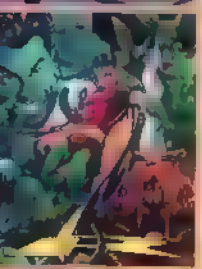


HEAT INDEX

SANDMAN ENDLESS NIGHTS (Vertigo/DC) Neil Gaiman collaborates with a galaxy of artists on some of the most powerful tales in his canon: Death thwarting an Italian nobleman's search for immortality; Delirium assembling an army of madmen to save a troubled girl; and Dream falling for a mortal at the dawn of time, featuring allusions to Superman and Green Lantern!

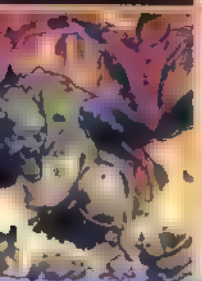
CARY NORD If Chewbacca's throwdown with the grizzly, flesh-eating wampa in Dark Horse's *Star Wars Tales* #17 is any indication, fans can expect to be blown away by Nord's fierce creatures and barbaric battles when *Conan* kicks off with Kurt Busiek (*JLA/Avengers*) in January. Nord's pencils have come a long way since his *Daredevil* run, and we can't wait to see him take his hacks at comics' favorite Barbarian!

WOLVERINE #6 (Marvel) Low on action but high on character development, *Wolverine* #6 stands as a perfect study of Wolverine and Nightcrawler's relationship. From Wolverine's self-loathing after killing 27 men in the previous issue to Nightcrawler's sermon on Wolverine's actions, this issue made us remember why we loved it when this mutant Odd Couple became best buddies all those years ago.



TEEN TITANS #4 (DC) The Titans' little boy grows up in a hurry! After the trauma of getting shot by Deathstroke, Impulse decides he needs an upgrade, so he heads for the public library—and proceeds to read *every* book in the place, absorbing all the knowledge within. Later on, Bart shows up to save Robin from a shotgun blast to the face—as Kid Flash, a move that had us running the hallways and cheering!

EL CAZADOR #2 (CrossGen) No parrots. No "argh, matey!" or "shiver me timbers." Just a gritty pirate tale with a majestic Spanish ship, a crew of black-hearted, backstabbing buccaneers and the beautiful, vengeful mistress of the seas who commands them with saber in hand. Toss in a mutiny, an intense duel and a marooning on a desert island, and you've got a treasure trove of high seas adventure.



TREVOR HAIRSINE Not since *Ultimates* penciler Bryan Hitch has an artist generated such well-deserved hype as *Ultimate Six* artist Trevor Hairsine (*Cla$$war*). Hairsine's refined and detailed pencils make every character stand out, and his gorgeous piece of art featuring Doc Ock taking out four S.H.I.E.L.D. scientists in issue #2 of *Six* left us begging for more work from this up-and-coming superstar.

BAT TO THE FUTURE

Judd Winick and Dustin Nguyen will follow Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso on *Batman*

The stars keep lining up to take a crack at the Bat *Outsiders* scribe Judd Winick and *Wildcats Version 3.0* artist Dustin Nguyen have been tapped as the new creative team on *Batman* following the six-issue run of Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso. The duo will take over for a six-issue run of their own with April's issue #626 that looks to keep the momentum of DC's hottest title humming along.

"We're definitely shooting to tap into things that Jeph [Loeb] did and things that Brian will do," promised Winick. "We don't want it to seem like these are self-encapsulated mini-series under the *Batman* title. They're not. Some of the plot points—albeit even minor ones—that were brought up in both these arcs will have a place in ours."

What other plot points can readers expect? "I'm basically writing a crime story with two villains, and the villains will have as large a part of the story as Batman does," explained Winick, who refused to reveal the identities of his rogues. "I will say it involves gangsters," teased the scribe. "And both Batman and Robin will be part of the story."

Putting all these characters to paper will be the youthful Nguyen, who gets the chance to apply his slick and polished style to the Dark Knight. "I'm definitely excited!" gushed Nguyen. "Batman's the first character I ever saw. He's one of the main reasons I got into comics in the first place! I love *Wildcats*—but you can't say no to *Batman*!"

Winick's one person who's certainly glad Nguyen said yes. "Dustin's work on *Wildcats* is amazing," raved the scribe. "And now people are going to get to see him do Batman. This will put Dustin absolutely through the roof—he'll become a household name overnight!"

Not only that—the duo plans to have fun in the process. "It's fun writing Batman!" chuckled Winick. "Everyone who writes comics has at least one Batman story in them. It's Batman, for God's sakes! And when I finished the first issue, I realized, 'Yeah, okay, I just wrote my first *Batman* issue.' That's pretty cool!" ■ RH

THE GREAT DEBATE

'ALIAS': ALL AGES OR ADULTS ONLY?

Marvel's *Alias* adopts a new identity in February 2004. The House of Ideas' first ongoing MAX book hit the shelves in November with the introduction of the shocking "F-word" every page, and super-heroine-turned-private investigator Jessica Jones isn't getting altogether; she's simply joining the staff of the *Daily Bugle* and working with reporter Ben Urich on investigative journalism issues. All-new, all-ages monthly called *The Pulse*. But not everyone applauds the switch. We pulled two *Wizard* staffers for their takes on this hot-button issue!

ALL AGES!

It's time for *Alias* to stop being unanonymous.

After over two years of producing one of the most, most awesome and sophisticated comics on the market today, writer Brian Michael Bendis and Marvel need to make sure *Alias* finally sells like one of the most, most intricate and sophisticated comics on the market today. And there's only one way to do that: make sure the comic appeals to a mainstream audience of all ages, something the mature-reader MAX series fails to do on both counts.

Marvel's move to re-title *Alias* as *The Pulse* and focus on more Marvel Universe-centric characters and stories—as well as pick up Bendis' *Ultimate Spider-Man* collaborator, Mark Bagley, as the series' ongoing artist—is the first step in making *The Pulse* the hit that *Alias* deserved to be all along.

While *Alias*' mature-reader label stopped characters such as the X-Men, the Avengers and Spider-Man from making major appearances, the first arc of the new series will center around an exposé on the Green Goblin and future issues will feature top-tier characters such as Spider-Man and Wolverine pulling in thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of fans left out in the cold until now.

Drop all the foul language, anal sex and dirty jokes out of an *Alias* comic and you still have one un-f—ing-believable comic. [*EDITOR'S NOTE: That's called likeness, kids!*], so let's open it up to everyone from ages 12 to 112. Let's pull in the *Sandman* fans and the X-Men fans. Let's get the 14-year-old girl who just saw the "Spider-Man" movie as well as the 45-year-old who's been reading every X-Men comic since *Giant Size X-Men #1*.

The Pulse, most likely, won't ever be a Top 10 title, but with a Top 10 creative team on it, the series finally has a chance to get the attention it deserves. Now, get out there, tell a friend and make a f—ing difference by buying *The Pulse*. ■ MIKE COTTON

ADULTS ONLY!

Let me put it as bluntly as possible: No f—ing way should Marvel turn *Alias* and make it an all-ages book!

Alias, for me, was one of the few comics where the PCP (Politically Correct Police Department) weren't allowed to patrol. Private Investigator Jessica Jones could wallow in self-pity and nothing, possibly provided it with rough language while getting blitzed, then wrap it all up in a downward spiral of meaningless, anonymous sex—just like a lot of real people I know. Say what you want about her, but Jessica Jones was one of the more realistically portrayed characters in any fiction medium.

So what does Marvel do? In an effort to get a larger number of readers on the title, the publisher transforms the book into an all-ages newspaper thriller. However, in doing so, they'll eliminate all the things that make Jessica an interesting character, i.e. the adult elements and details of her story and characterization.

Can anyone honestly tell me that Marvel doesn't make enough dough off of the X- and Spider-franchises (not to mention licensing, movie and toy deals) to keep a couple of their quality but lower-selling titties afloat?

If you say no, look at DC's Vertigo imprint and some of its kickass adult reads like *The Losers*, *Human Target*, *Fables* and *Y: The Last Man* (all of which, incidentally, are untold by *Alias*, but aren't in danger of cancellation). And what about alienating the current fans who like *Alias* as is?

I'm a fan and reader. I loved *Alias* and the job done by writer Brian Michael Bendis, who made his name penning edgy indie hits like *Torso*, *Jinx* and *Goldfish*. But softening *Alias*' content in an effort to get more readers? That's just pandering, which is another reason for a bad idea. ■ ANDY SERWIN

THEY SAID IT...

"He's full of f---ing venom. He's a seriously pissed-off guy but he channels it with a skill he's been instilled with. I've absolutely fallen in love with him."

"PUNISHER" STAR THOMAS JANE, ON FRANK CASTLE

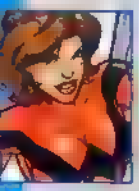
AVENGERS DEATH POOL

With December's *Avengers* #76, writer Geoff Johns (*Teen Titans*) finishes his run on the title, but that doesn't mean there won't still be some surprises in store. According to Johns, in his final issue—featuring art by Steve Sadowski (*JSA*)—an Avenger will die! Being curious (and a little bit morbid), *Wizard* decided to run down the heroes most likely due for the dirt nap.

BLACK PANTHER

WHY HE'S LIKELY TO DIE: Upping the Panther's profile was one of Johns' main objectives with *Avengers*, and a shocking ending like his death would definitely throw readers for a loop that they'd be talking about for years.

ODDS: Would the fan-favorite writer really kill off one of his favorite characters? 50-1



WASP

WHY SHE'S LIKELY TO DIE: A founding member of the Avengers and a longtime favorite, Johns helped the Wasp along by spotlighting her on-again, off-again love affair with Giant-Man. Her death would rip the team apart as well as add a new twist to Avengers lore.

ODDS: As a founding member, the Wasp is one of the few characters we can give an automatic pass. 30-1

GIANT-MAN

WHY HE'S LIKELY TO DIE: With a recent issue where Giant-Man asked his longtime lover, the Wasp, to marry him and was soundly rejected, Hank Pym might be an Avenger looking to make a big splash and prove his loyalty by giving his life for the team.

ODDS: While Giant-Man is a real contender for grave-digging duty, his death wouldn't have half the impact as watching his relationship with his ex-flame evolve. 20-1

FALCON

WHY HE'S LIKELY TO DIE. A major player in Johns' *Avengers* run, Falcon's become one of the most popular characters to come from the series in the last few years and his death could be a major Marvel event.

ODDS: Killing off one of the few cool, African-American characters in the Marvel Universe doesn't seem like Johns' style, which leaves Falcon relatively safe. 10-1

ANT-MAN

WHY HE'S LIKELY TO DIE Well, actually, he's already dead. Killed off in *Alias* #27, Ant-Man's epitaph is already written in stone.

ODDS: Although he's technically already dead, Ant-Man getting knocked off again would be a pretty crappy surprise. 5-1

JACK OF HEARTS

WHY HE'S LIKELY TO DIE: Throughout Johns' *Avengers* run, the writer's played up the fact the Jack of Hearts would explode if the Zero Energy that powers him were to build up in is system.

ODDS: Johns goes out with a bang. We think Jack of Hearts is about to get trumped by the death card! EVEN ■ MC

CROSSING NEW BOUNDARIES

A slew of series finales paves the way for a more streamlined 'New CrossGen'

Several of CrossGen's longest-standing titles will end in early 2004—but the publisher insists that the finales are all part of a master plan.

Prior to the launch of *The War* in February, the storylines in *Crux*, *The First*, *Meridian*, *Mystic*, *The Path*, *Ruse*, *Scion*, *Sigil* and *Solus*—all of which are closely tied to the imminent war with the Negation Universe—will reach their final conclusion. Titles like *Sojourn*, *Way of the Rat* and *Route 666* will continue alongside new series like *El Cazador*, *Abadazad* and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (a new title launching in January). And while the decision to end several core titles was partially motivated by CrossGen's recent financial woes, the publisher points out that many of the finales were planned from the very beginning—and the end of the titles doesn't necessarily spell the end for the characters.

"As promised, the coming of *The War* is delivering the finales of several of our titles—but that doesn't mean that your favorite characters are disappearing," assured CrossGen's Senior V.P of Publishing Bill Rosemann. "Yes, some may fall in combat, but others will live to fight another day."

Despite the recent signings of several top CrossGen creators (including Butch Guice, Greg Land and Jeff Johnson) by Marvel and DC, CrossGen insists that the state of the company is healthy, and the new streamlined lineup accomplishes the dual goal of responding to what the readers want and keeping the company financially viable. "Moving forward into 2004, we're listening to readers more than ever, and right now they're telling us that they want stand-alone series that offer unique adventure," explained Rosemann. "Not only did *El Cazador* #1 sell out in a week, but orders for issue #3 actually surpassed orders for #2. Meanwhile, the response to *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, the new sexy '60s spy book by Tony Bedard and Mike Perkins, is really encouraging. So whether you crave barbarians, sci-fi, horror, fantasy, pirates or talking kung-fu monkeys, the New CrossGen will have a book for you!" ■ RH

MARVEL NAMES NEW PUBLISHER

Hires Buckley to fill position; Jemas shifts to marketing role

In a long rumored move, Marvel recently announced a new publisher as well as a new position for former Marvel President of Publishing and New Media Bill Jemas

In mid-October, Marvel named Dan Buckley, formerly of both Marvel and Fleer, as the House of Ideas' new publisher. Buckley will oversee all aspects of Marvel's core comic book and graphic novel publishing operations, including editorial, sales and marketing.

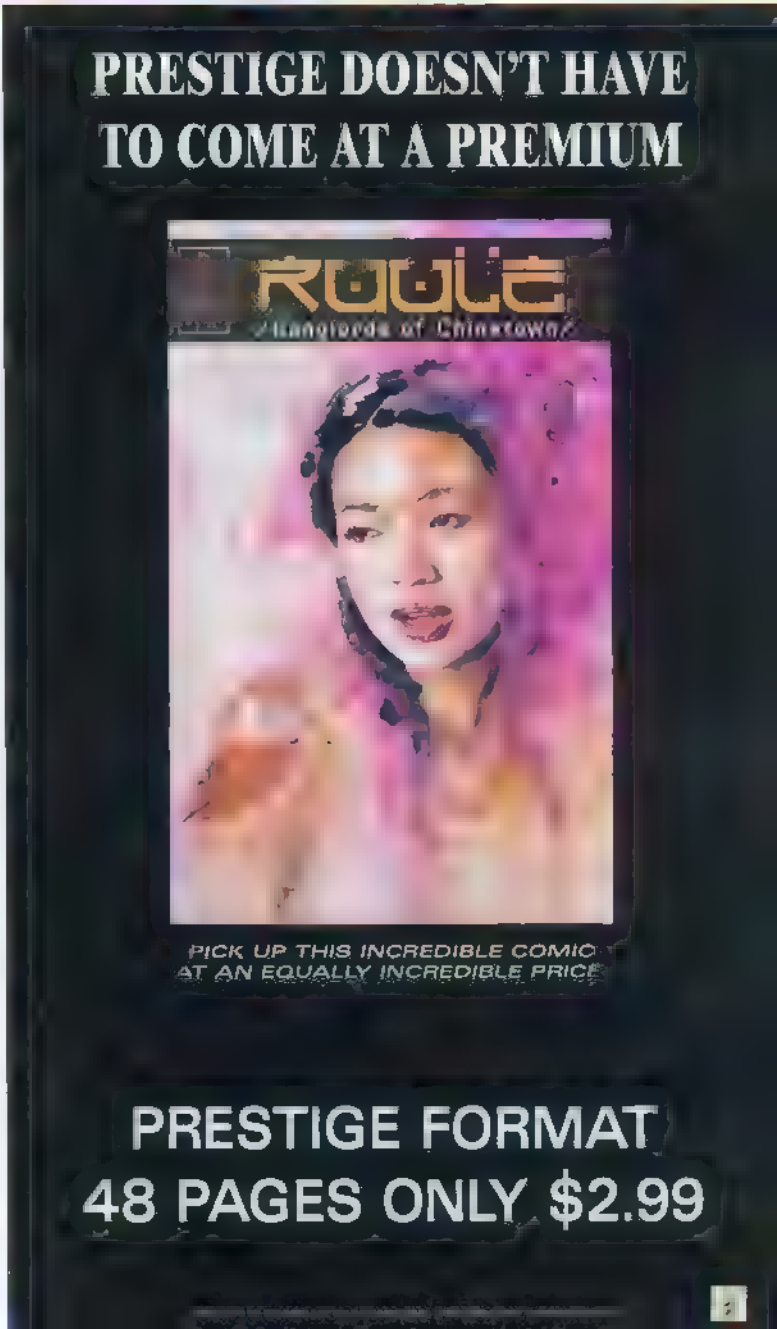
"I cannot communicate how excited I am about this opportunity both personally and professionally," commented Buckley in a press release. "To be provided the opportunity to participate in the stewardship and growth of characters that are a core piece of American pop culture is awe-inspiring. Plus when you factor in my personal passion for these characters with the chance to work with Bill Jemas, Joe Quesada and the editorial and creative teams they have assembled, this is truly a once in a lifetime opportunity."

Jemas, who made a name for himself as the public face of Marvel, oftentimes taking on fans in heated debates as well as making bold moves such as publishing the Wolverine *Origin* comic, will transfer his role at Marvel to that of Chief Marketing Officer. According to Marvel, the shift in Jemas' management responsibilities is "designed to leverage his strong management skills, analytical abilities and creative expertise in a new role that will be focused on expanding synergies between Marvel's three operating divisions."

Over the past few months, it has been rumored that Jemas (writer of *Marville* and *Namor*) would leave Marvel all together after his contract ends in January 2004, but the highly controversial figure decided to stay with the company in a different capacity.

"Today, I'd like to say publicly what I have told my friends in private," stated Jemas, who declined further comment, in a press release. "This has been a voluntary and important transition. I continue to support, help guide and implement the management changes at Marvel, and I am very much looking forward to the new challenges I will have with respect to my own role within the company." ■ **MC**

JEMAS' 'MARVILLE'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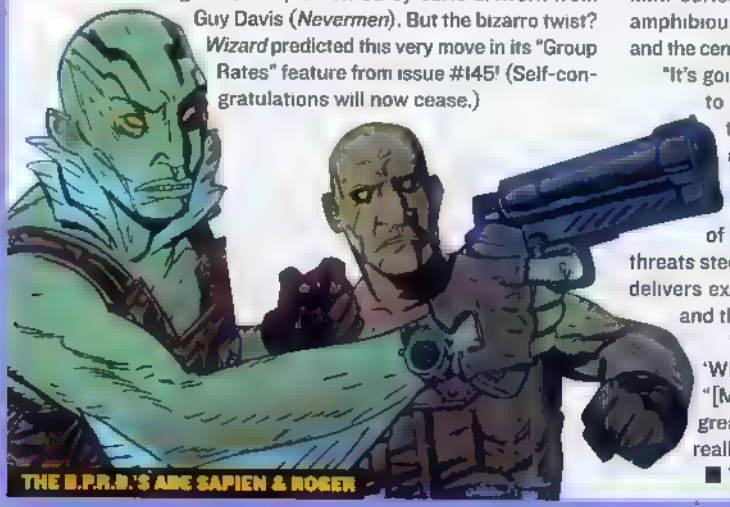
B.P.R.D. TACKLES MONTHLY TERROR

Mignola teams with artist Guy Davis on monster-bashing minis

The Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense (B.P.R.D.) may wanna investigate the halls of Wizard, because we've developed some crazy psychic abilities!

Starting in March from Dark Horse, the B.P.R.D. will be battling all things ghastly in a monthly series of nightmarish adventures from the monstrous mind of Hellboy creator Mike Mignola, complemented by eerie artwork from Guy Davis (*Nevermen*). But the bizarro twist? *Wizard* predicted this very move in its "Group Rates" feature from issue #145! (Self-congratulations will now cease.)



THE B.P.R.D.'S ABE SAPIEN & ROGER

"I would love to see this turn into my version of the old *Doom Patrol* or *Challengers of the Unknown*," described Mignola. "[The B.P.R.D.] is a great working stiff crew of guys who fight monsters."

The bizarre frogmen from Mignola's first *Hellboy* series, *Seed of Destruction* (on which the April-debuting "Hellboy" film is loosely based), will return to wreak havoc in the first mini-series, which stars the pyrokinetic Liz Sherman, the amphibious Abe Sapien, disembodied spirit Johann Krauss and the centuries-year-old artificial man, Roger the Homunculus.

"It's going to be structured as a series of mini-series; five- to six-issue arcs that will be coming out very close together," explained Mignola. "It will have the feel of a monthly book, but it will be just structured as chapters. One mini-series will build on the other."

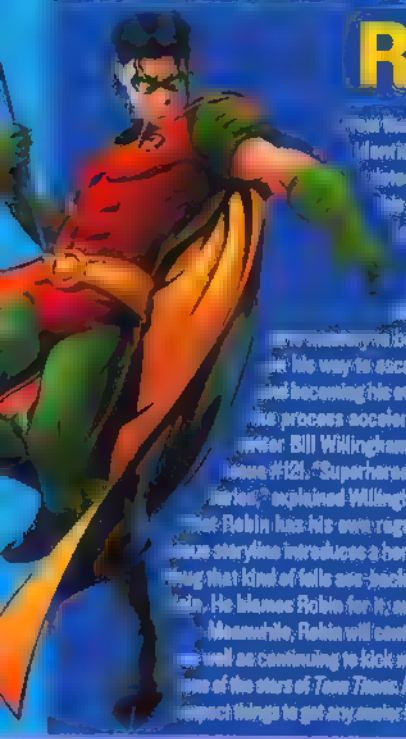
While Hellboy will be facing the freaks and fiends of folklore and mythology, the B.P.R.D. will deal with threats steeped more in the Lovecraftian vein of horror, which delivers exactly the kind of atmosphere Davis loves to draw and the horror Mignola adores writing.

"The story has a great, surreal and shadowy sort of 'What's hiding in the dark?' feel," revealed Davis. "[Mignola] is the master of crazy horror and has some great and wild ideas for the series. I think people are really going to be surprised by what he has in store!"

■ TODD CASEY

CHARACTER TO WATCH

ROBIN



[illegible] the mantle [illegible] Identity of Gotham's Dark Knight [illegible] detective, Tim Drake has proved [illegible] his worth as the latest [illegible] to don the Robin mantle. [illegible] With detective [illegible] solving three of his mentor [illegible] the-staff swingin' quartet [illegible] Boy Wonder, the talented teen is well [illegible] on his way to escaping the shadow of the Bat [illegible] and becoming his own man. In 2004, Robin finds [illegible] process accelerated, courtesy of incoming writer Bill Willingham, who starts in December's [illegible] issue #121. "Superheroes are defined by their adversaries," explained Willingham. "So I want to make sure Robin has his own rogues gallery. The first [illegible] storyline introduces a horrible, horrible man-monster thing that kind of falls ass-backwards into being a super-villain. He blames Robin for it, and Robin has his [illegible]. Meanwhile, Robin will continue to play a role in *Batman* [illegible] as well as continuing to kick major ass on the weekends as one of the stars of *Teen Titans*. As for Tim's personal life? Don't expect things to get any easier in the coming months!" ■ RH

RULE WITH AN IRON FIST

Tony Stark...Secretary of Defense? That's what's going on in a recent *Iron Man* storyarc that finds ol' Shell-head nominated for the position by President Bush. So what would Stark's first day on the job be like? We dug up his "To Do" list!

FROM THE DESK OF
TONY STARK
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

- ☐ Shave the mustache (nobody trusts a politician with facial hair—Abe Lincoln be damned!)
- ☑ Monitor possible security threats at Playboy Mansion with installation of shower cams
- ☐ Custom build red, white and blue armor for official occasions
- ☐ "Lunch" with Ted Kennedy from 11 a.m. to Happy Hour
- ☑ Have intern polish "Li'l Iron Man"
- ☑ Install mini-bar full bar in the White House Situation Room!

5 QUESTIONS... ANDY KUBERT

Just call Andy Kubert a Renaissance Man.

Collaborating with *über*-popular and *über*-talented scribe Neil Gaiman on *1602*—the mini-series that finds the dawning of the Marvel Age occurring 400 years too early—Andy Kubert's proving that he's made for the high-profile gig; aside from *1602*, Kubert garnered national media attention as the artist on *Origin*, the long-awaited mini-series that finally revealed the secret background of Marvel's most popular character, Wolverine.

But Kubert's success is no fluke; it's more like natural selection. The son of comics legend Joe Kubert, Andy—along with his brother Adam—is one of the top artists in comics today, and both siblings teach classes at the Joe Kubert School of Cartooning and Graphic Design in Dover, NJ. Despite his heavy workload, *Wizard* got Kubert to take a break from his time travel stint to chew the fat with us.

What's it like working with Neil Gaiman on *1602*?

One of, if not the best, working experiences I've had. He puts a tremendous amount of energy and thought into what he does, and it translates onto the page. And he's also a great guy to chat with.

What writers would you like to work with that you haven't collaborated with yet?

Geez, after the last few years, I've been really blessed with the writers I've worked with. Neil Gaiman, Paul Jenkins, Mark Millar and Mark Waid are all writers that I'd work with again at anytime. I'd be a chump if I didn't say Frank Miller. Grant Morrison, Brian Bendis and Brian Azzarello are three guys that I would love to work with also.

If you could only draw one book for the rest of your career, what would it be and why?

That's a hard one. Probably a title like *Wolverine*. I think my strength lies in the darker, brooding type of character. And visually, that character is awesome. Also, besides being a superhero, there's also a realistic side to him that I like

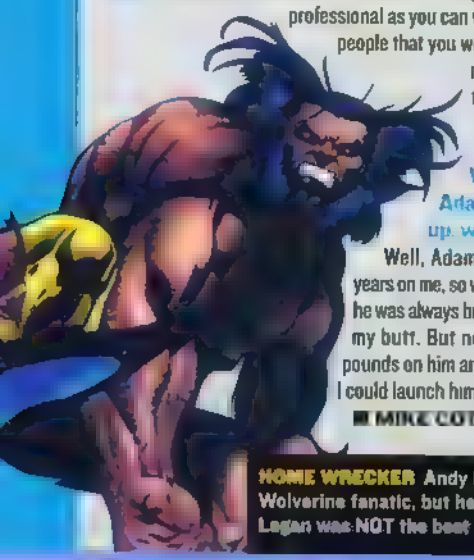
What's the most important lesson your dad ever taught you?

Well, in this business, the best lesson he ever gave me was to be as professional as you can with editors and other people that you work with. That means making deadlines (I try!), returning phone calls, and just being up front with people.

When you and Adam were growing up, who won in fights?

Well, Adam has two and a half years on me, so when we were younger, he was always bigger. So he would kick my butt. But now, I have about 30 pounds on him and age doesn't matter I could launch him [*laughs*].

■ MIKE COTTON

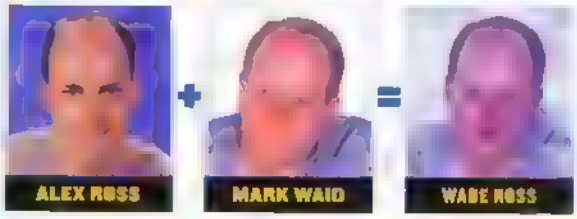


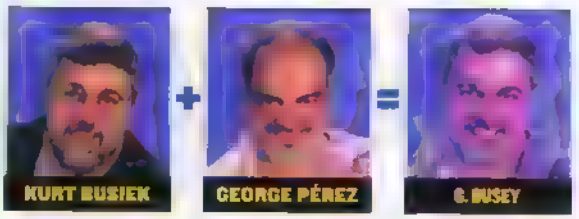
HOME WRECKER Andy Kubert may be a Wolverine fanatic, but he quickly learned Logan was NOT the best at housebreaking.

FACE RACE

Fan-favorite creators hook up

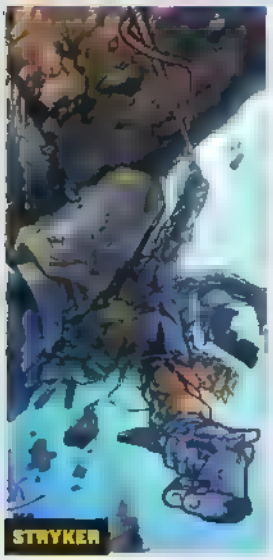
Ever wonder if science could create the perfect comic creator? What if scientists took Stan Lee's visionary storytelling and mixed it with Jack Kirby's kenetic art style? What if science could produce an offspring of Mark Waid's action-packed scripts and Alex Ross' realistic painting? Well, wait no longer. *Wizard* took your favorite creative teams and found out what their super-kids could look like...if two men being intimate was legal outside of Maine and Hawaii





COW ON STRYKE

Relaunches 'Codename: Strykeforce'



This spring, Top Cow plans to Stryke while the iron's hot.

After an eight-year hiatus, the Marc Silvestri-created series will return in April 2004 under writer Jay Faerber (*Noble Causes*) and artist Martin Montiel (*Magdalena/Vampirella*) in a new series that will see the team of mercenaries refocus their mission. According to Faerber, the one-time guns for hire will take just about any job as long as the pay is right, and fans can expect to see them pull off big money heists and con jobs to boot.

"This is pretty much an entirely new book," said Faerber. "The only holdovers from the original book are team leader Stryker and Black Anvil. The other five characters are brand new.

"A dimension we added is that the team are wanted fugitives, on the run from the U.S. government," continued Faerber. "I won't get into why just yet, as that's something we'll get to in early issues. But it makes their missions that much more dangerous, because they can't rely on the authorities for help." ■ **HEIDI WARD**

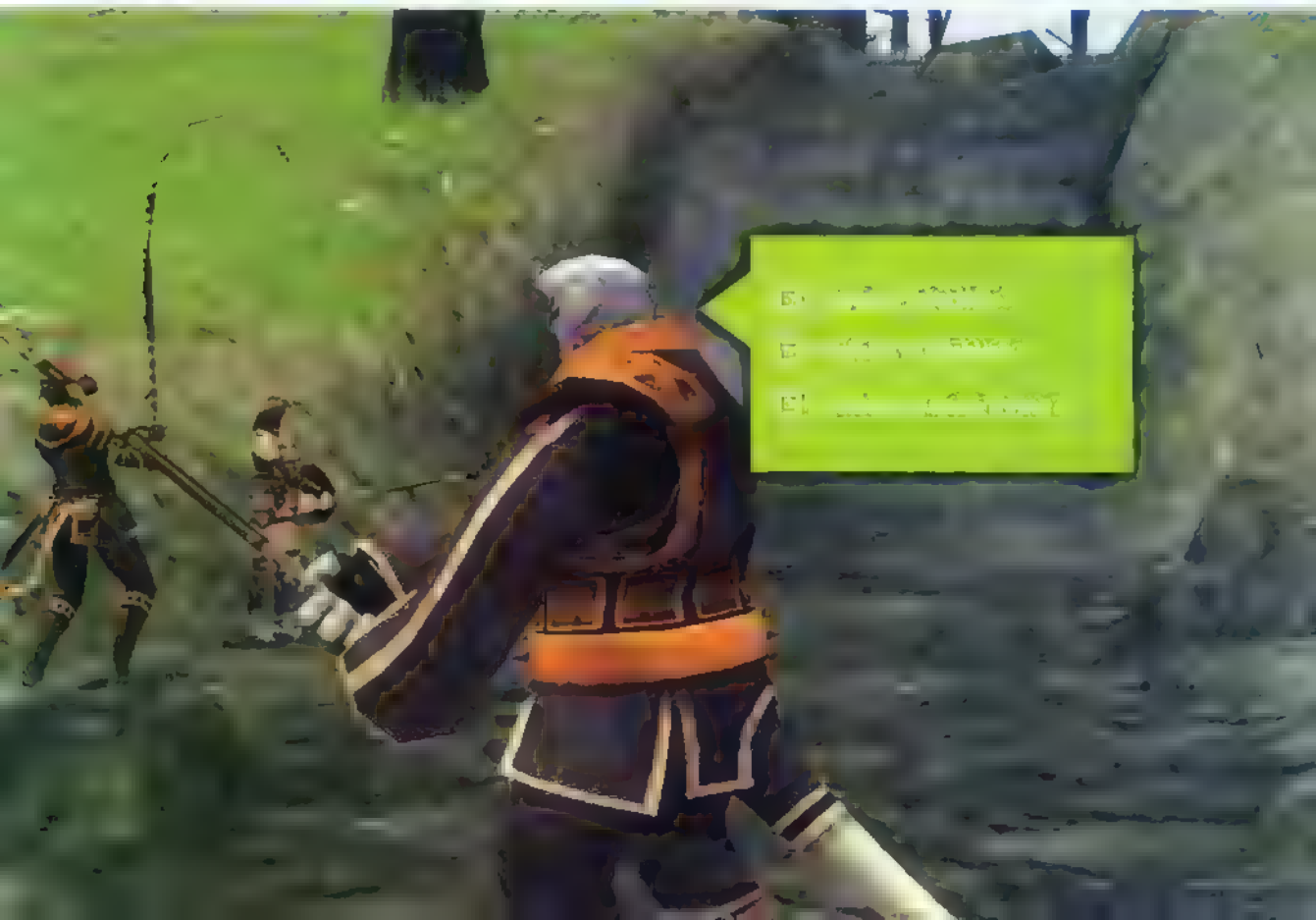
DRECK THE HALLS

A. AMBUSH BUG STOCKING STUFFER #1 Brother Power the Geek, Sugar & Spike and the Joker all make appearances as the Bug presents season's greetings from around the world, a tale involving Cheeks the Toy Wonder and even the true meaning of Christmas. Only from the mind of Keith Giffen, folks.

B. SLEEPWALKER HOLIDAY SPECIAL #1 Marvel's sleepiest hero may not get tanked on eggnog, but he knows how to get a holiday party started! When a dimension-hopping demon shows up on alter ego Rick Sheridan's doorstep, Sleepy lays down a season's beating! All this and a pin-up by Joe Quesada!

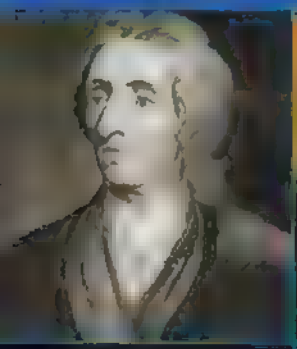
C. WORLD'S FINEST #121 In a bizarre holiday tale, the Joker and the Prankster team up to rob a department store—by shrinking themselves and wearing elf disguises! Good thing Batman happens to be dressed as Santa and Superman turns up in a reindeer outfit, thus saving the day...and Christmas.

D. DC COMICS PRESENTS #87 Because YOU demanded it (in 1984)! Superman and Santa Claus team up to thwart the Toyman! Supes gets zapped by a toy ray gun that leaves him laid out like Krypto with parvo, but Santa's elves get him safely to the North Pole. ■ **JESSE THOMPSON**



John Locke

Deathlok



JOHN LOCKE

DEATHLOK

THE VERDICT Deathlok, natch! How many professional philosophers do you even know of these days? Killer robots rule!

ONI DIGS UP 'THE COFFIN'

Hester and Huddleston team up for sequel, 'Deep Sleeper'

Like a pack of crazed morticians, fans are dying to see Phil Hester (*Green Arrow*) and Mike Huddleston (*Harley Quinn*) jump back into *The Coffin*.

Come February, Hester and Huddleston return to Oni Press to deliver another thrilling installment of their hit mini-series, *The Coffin*—which took home the Best New Character Award from *Wizard* in 2001—with the four-part mini-series *Deep Sleeper*.

The Coffin: Deep Sleeper introduces an entirely new cast to the mythos, with the only carry-over from the first tale being Hester writing, Huddleston penciling and the story being a chilling tale of death and apparitions. It will focus on Cole Gibson, a failed writer and family man, whose dreams transport him to a strange world that exists in the astral plane.

"This world is full of all sorts of scary and thrilling experiences," described Hester. "Cole winds up losing his family and fighting to get them back. There's a great bad guy and bizarre supporting characters."

With Hester having flexed his writing muscles on *Firebreather* from Image and Huddleston strengthening his penciling skills on DC's recently shelved *Harley Quinn*, can fans expect an even bigger hit the second time around?

"[There is] a lot more action this time around," promised Hester. "And what I believe to be an even scarier plot twist than anything we whipped out in *The Coffin*!"

■ TODD CASEY

WHAT THE?!

We all know that when Archie says, "Jump!", teens say, "Who's Archie?" That's why Westchester County, NY is going to use the loveable scamp and the gang from Pop's Malt Shop (Betty, Veronica and Jughead) in an anti-drinking campaign aimed at teenagers—because nothing speaks to teens like a dated 1950s kid's comic. Those Riverdale punks better recognize, there's a new anti-beer baron in town and he don't take guff from nobody!

AVENGERS BRACE FOR 'THUNDER' STORM

Busiek, Nicieza and Kitson team on new 'Avengers vs. Thunderbolts' mini-series

The Avengers better get ready—there's a storm coming full of Thunderbolts.

After an unsuccessful revamp with "Fight Club" overtones and a subsequent cancellation, the Thunderbolts team of former villains-turned-heroes returns in a six-issue, March-launching mini-series that pits them against Earth's Mightiest Heroes, the Avengers.

Co-writing the series, *Thunderbolts* co-creator Kurt Busiek (*JLA/Avengers*) and former *Thunderbolts* scribe Fabian Nicieza team up with artist Barry Kitson (*Empire*) on a mini that Busiek said he jumped at the chance to collaborate on.

"Fabian's doing the heavy lifting," admits Busiek of the *Avengers vs. Thunderbolts* series. "Fabian's the main writer and I'm the junior writer. It's nice to be involved. When [Editor] Tom [Brevoort] called and said there was a chance of *Thunderbolts* coming back, I said, 'Well, if you want me involved in some way, I'd be happy to.' That's how it all started."

According to Busiek, the new series, which could reinvigorate the franchise, will pit the Avengers against the Thunderbolts, with Hawkeye, a longtime Avenger and former T'bolts leader, right in the middle.

"The Thunderbolts are out there, doing their thing, saving the world," revealed Busiek. "But they're the Thunderbolts, not the Avengers. They do things in a somewhat different way, especially since they're being led by Baron Zemo. And Zemo doesn't think like a traditional superhero; he thinks like a baron. The Avengers are convinced he's up to something.

NEW ZEMO DESIGN

"The question at the heart of the series is: Are the Thunderbolts heroes or are they still villains pretending to be heroes or are they heroes sliding back towards becoming villains?" posed Busiek. "Certainly there are those Avengers who think the Thunderbolts should be in jail. And then there are Avengers like Hawkeye, who have a lot of faith in the Thunderbolts."

As for the lineups of each respective team, look for Captain America, Iron Man, Scarlet Witch, Vision, Yellowjacket and Wasp on the Avengers side, and Baron Zemo, Moonstone, the Fixer, Atlas, Vantage and Songbird on the Thunderbolts roster. But Busiek dropped a hint teasing that the Thunderbolts' organization will be expanding.

"The Thunderbolts will be getting a new member, but we're staying mum on that until the series comes out." ■ MC

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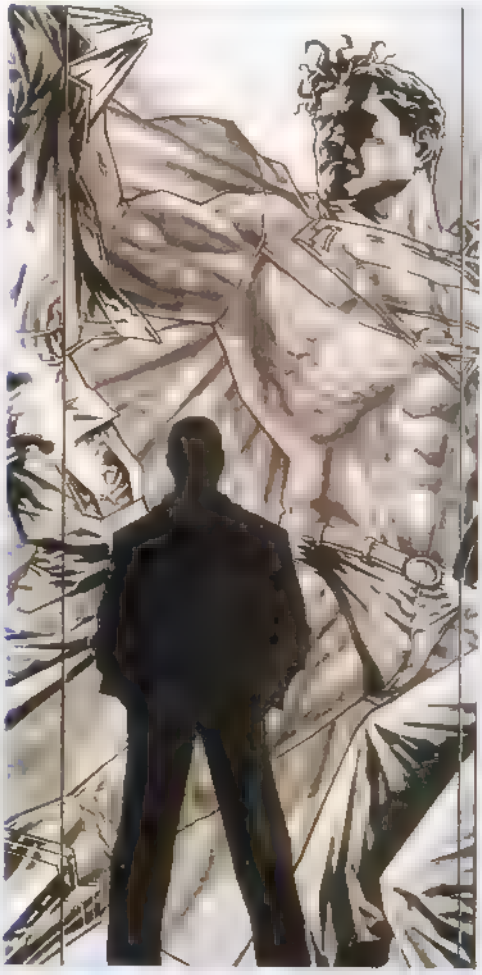
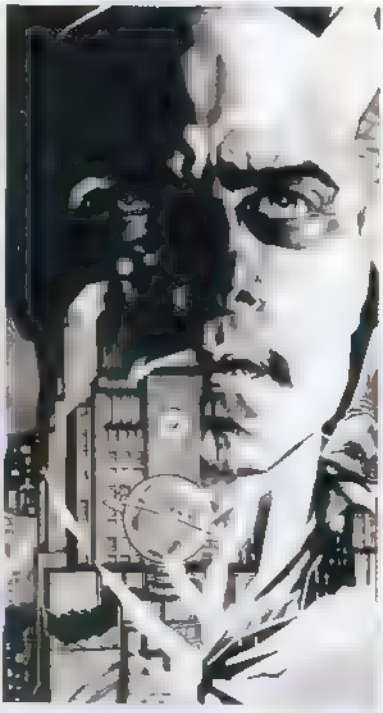
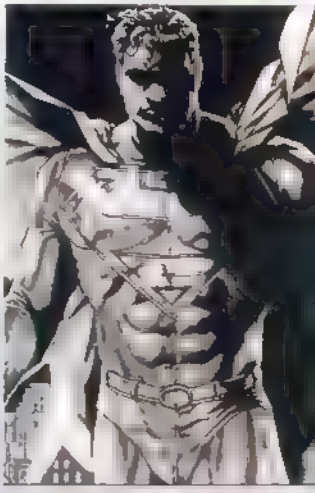
STEEL-ING BEAUTY

Lee Bermejo unveils a glimpse of 'Lex Luthor: Man of Steel' mini

With Lex Luthor and Superman set to get facelifts in summer 2004—courtesy of DC's *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* mini-series from Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo—*Wizard* went directly to Bermejo to get a sneak peek at the artist's dazzling takes on the iconic characters. "With Superman, I'm definitely trying to make him a little bit more imposing," notes Bermejo. "For Lex, I'm using Daniel Day Lewis, in terms of how he can go from being really moody, intense to being very charismatic and introspective. I'm trying little different things." What sorts of things? Take a gander below! ■ **RH**







"This is from Lex Luthor's perspective," pointed out Bermejo. "And I kind of see him as being this human racist. He loves humanity, and he wants to see mankind continue to evolve through its own means—not through what he sees as a new alien threat. He doesn't want people to start relying on Superman. So one of the big things in the mini-series is this huge science tower that Lex builds as a tribute to mankind's achievements—and it's his way of saying, 'Humans don't need you.' This is really an attempt to get people inside Lex's head."

LEE BERMEJO, ON THE 'LEX LUTHOR' MINI-SERIES

SECRET WAR

10 reasons why Brian Michael Bendis' revamp of Marvel's hottest '80s crossover will have fans charging to the frontlines

His marching orders in hand, Brian Michael Bendis plays commander-in-chief this February with Marvel's all-new *Secret War*.

The scribe's battle plans target two objectives: ensure the Marvel Universe's villains fall in line as real threats (both physical and psychological) and that *Secret War* eclipses its popular predecessor, 1984's *Secret Wars* maxi-series.

"This isn't your daddy's *Secret Wars*," says Bendis of the six-issue, quarterly mini-series. "Nick Fury discovers there's a connection between the techno-villains that's been so far unrevealed. And it scares him to his very core."

So how does Bendis plan to wage his *War*? Here's his 10-step plan to comic conquest.

STEP 1: ULTIMIZE THE MARVEL U.

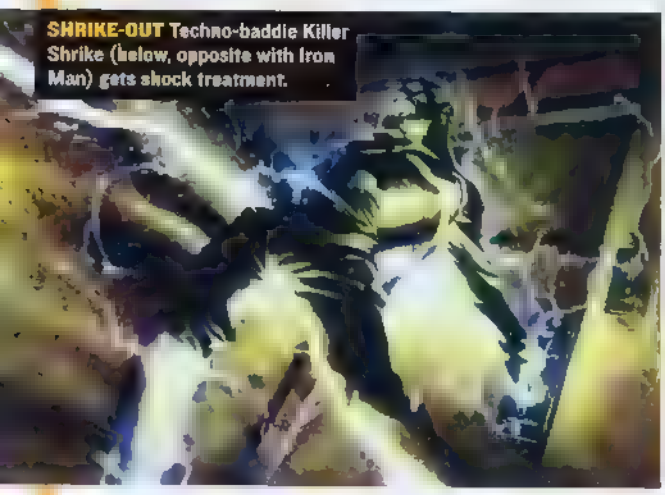
Known for his work on Marvel's Ultimate line, Bendis can't wait to get his new *Secret War* recruits into basic training.

"I love the interaction between the characters," says Bendis. "You'll see Wolverine f---ing with Daredevil. It's so damn fun."

STEP 2: INTRODUCE THE NEXT ALEX ROSS

Secret War showcases the painted art of Italian phenom Gabriele Dell'Otto, who illustrated covers for Marvel's *The Call* ongoing.

"Gabriele is one of those fantastic new artists who arrived fully realized and polished where you scratch your head and go, where did *this* guy come from?" touts super-artist Jim Lee. "If he is as prolific as he is talented, Gabriele is going to take comics in America by storm."



SHRIKE-OUT Techno-baddie Killer Shrike (below, opposite with Iron Man) gets shock treatment.

STEP 3: BULK UP THE WAR CHEST

"This could be a return of the *Secret Wars* brand name," Bendis says, recalling Marvel's red-hot maxi-series from the mid-'80s where heroes and villains fought on a cosmic battlefield. (It even spawned a sequel.) And while his *War* won't go cosmic, it's tailored for follow-up series.

"This sets up a new world look at the Marvel Universe."

STEP 4: POP A 'CAP'

Bendis drafts all of the Marvel big guns into service.

"The series starts out focusing on Luke Cage, Captain America, Nick Fury, Daredevil, Spider-Man and Black Widow, but everyone in the Marvel Universe will appear," he says.

"This isn't your daddy's *Secret Wars*"

BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS

STEP 5: ELEVATE THE VILLAINS

Name a Marvel techno-villain and you'll find them in *Secret War*. From Killer Shrike to Shocker to Jack O'Lantern, all join the fray.

"Ninety percent of the villains are people you'll know," reveals Bendis. "And what we're going to do—much like we did with the Purple Man in *Alias*—is make them less goofy and more of a threat. We're going to let them come into their own."

STEP 6: FIGHT DIRTY

"The big final hoo-ha is a *big* final hoo-ha," says Bendis of his New York City-based story. "It's the Avengers, Fantastic Four and the X-Men! The thing that people will look forward to are the exciting scenes that look like 'Black Hawk Down.' Those scenes are very dirty instead of being cosmic."

STEP 7: WEED OUT THE TRAITORS

Prepare to see Bendis unravel the Marvel Universe's status quo.

"Sh-- happens and that sh-- is big," says Bendis. "A main villain will switch sides because of the furiousness that he finds himself in the midst of. I don't want to say if any characters die, but there are life-altering events for lead characters. Nick Fury definitely comes out of this story not where he is now."

STEP 8: WAGE THE BIGGEST BATTLE EVER

"When you have the entire Marvel Universe cast of both heroes and villains, there's going to be some pretty spectacular fights," says the Portland-based writer. "As issue #3 begins, you start to see some of the biggest stuff I've *ever* written."

STEP 9: GIVE THE 'EXTRA' EFFORT

If you like your DVDs with bonus features, then *Secret War* will please you with pages of dossier files and supplemental material to the story.

"It's very much like *Watchmen*," Bendis says, "when each issue had someting cool to read at the end, but you didn't have to read it to enjoy the story."

STEP 10: DITCH THE BEYONDER

"When people think of *Secret Wars*, they think of silly, *Contest of Champions*-style stories," states Bendis. "This is the complete opposite. There's no Beyonder. There are no half-afro, white suit-wearing guys in this series. He had a jheri curl! What the f--- is that?" ■ **MIKE COTTON**

SUPERMAN/BATMAN #8

A-list artist Michael Turner teams with writer Jeph Loeb to render DC Comics' three biggest icons for the first time in his career

When Jeph Loeb snagged Michael Turner for the second arc of *Superman/Batman*, the writer knew the story needed fast pacing and witty dialogue. But Loeb also knew it needed something else a hot chick

JEPH LOEB
MICHAEL TURNER
DC COMICS

project from the moment Loeb (*Batman*) brought up the idea over dinner Although Turner's never been known for drawing superhero comics, that doesn't mean he's not ready

"I've always wanted to do something with Superman since I was a kid—I had the Underoos and everything," gushes Turner from his Los Angeles studio. "And it also came from Jeph and I talking about a Wonder Woman story we wanted to do. With that and the lawsuit holding me up from publishing my own stuff, this presented itself as a really cool thing to do."

While Loeb doesn't want to reveal too many plot details, the writer did say that the tale will redefine the relationship between Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman and pit them against one of DC s biggest villains.

"The second arc is about Wonder Woman and her working and personal relationship with Superman and Batman," explains Loeb "It's a very different story from other times we've seen them together because there is something all three of them want—all for very different reasons. It involves one of DC's greatest villains—some would argue *the* greatest villain—who is more than willing to kill all three of them *and* has the power to do so. It's an incredibly important moment in [the DC Universe] The focus of this book is to get the top people on stories that affect the entire world. The first round is about Lex Luthor. This next round is about...uh...that would be telling!"

While Turner hasn't ruled out working for DC in the future, his next project will be *Soulfire* for his own company, Aspen Comics.

"I'm not sure how much of my work will be for Aspen and how much will be for other companies," says the Aspen founder. "I definitely know after *Superman/Batman*, I'll be doing *Soulfire* with Jeph After that? Maybe I'll do a small run on something cool that comes along before I start *Ekos* with [*JSA* writer] Geoff Johns. Only time will tell."

■ **MIKE COTTON**

EXTREME TEAM-UP

THE DILLY-O Michael Turner teams with Jeph Loeb for a six-issue *Superman/Batman* arc kicking off in March that sees Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman all facing one of DC's deadliest villains

WHY YOU CARE Turner, whose only superhero work came from his Top Cow stint, jumps into the genre with one of today's hottest writers on one of DC Comics' top-selling titles to draw the company s three biggest icons See how that math adds up?

DID YOU KNOW? Both Los Angeles residents Turner and Loeb aren't just collaborators, they're also good friends, and are often seen in Hollywood's trendiest restaurants—along with buddy Geoff Johns—talking about superheroes and comics

"As with any project, I try and tailor it toward an artist's strengths. When Mike expressed interest, it didn't take a brain trust to figure out that it should involve Wonder Woman," admits Loeb of the six-issue storyline beginning with March's *Superman/ Batman* #8. "I had a story in mind and discussed it with Mike and he got very excited, drawing as we were talking. But that's our friendship. That's how we work together. We brought it back to [DC] and they gave us a very, very cool twist It was one of those 'You mean you'd let us do that?' moments They re not only willing—they're behind it 100 percent "

Turner (*Fathom*), who took the penciling gig while his now-settled lawsuit with Top Cow was ironed out, says he was hooked on the

NO SMALL WONDER The lasso's not the only magic thing on Wonder Woman! How's that breastplate staying on?

GUILLERMO DEL TORO

The 'I ing demon on the

WIZARD You've been working to make this movie for ng now. How did everything finally come together?

DEL TORO It finally happened when we met the right studio! [Producer] Larry Gordon took me onboard around '97 or '98, and we've been trying to do it since then. The draft that I liked took me about a year and a half to reach and polish. But after that, it was all a matter of finding the studio—and the studios were all trying to take the wrong route. I would get questions like, "Does he really have to be red? Does he have to look like the comics?" I swear to God, one of the questions I got asked was, "Can he be a guy that when he gets angry, he turns into Hellboy?" And I said, "Well, that's the Hulk."

How closely did you stick to M ola's vision in

When I met with Mike, I told him that I was going to make "The Last Emperor" of cheesy monster movies [*Laughs*]. The comic book is all about how you can best use your artistic sensibilities to seriously render what is otherwise a really silly premise, with really outlandish creatures and characters. And with the movie, we take the approach that you have to take some licenses. One of the greatest things in the comics is never knowing where Abe Sapien comes from. So in the movie, we don't try to explain it. We don't try to clarify anything that the comic book doesn't clarify. But we do flesh out a lot—because emotionally, I would say that the comic has great characters, but not great emotional arcs.

What is it about Hellboy that app

First of all, I think Hellboy is everybody. Mike has made him the ultimate blue-collar superhero. And one element that I loved about a character like Ben Grimm from the Fantastic Four, for example, was that he's a sort of morose, reluctant, incredibly powerful creature. But Hellboy is even more like that. He's a guy that likes to drink beer, watch TV and beat monsters—but he tries not to do it! He tells the monster, "Do we really have to do this?" And I also like that in a way, he's an underachiever. He says he's the world's greatest paranormal detective, and in reality, as Tom Manning says to him in the movie, "You're just a glorified bouncer."

And Ron Perlman is just perfect for the role

Ron is a very specific type of actor, a very powerful character actor, and when I started writing the screenplay, I completely tailored it to him. And when Larry Gordon gave me the go-ahead for the movie, the first call I made was to Ron. We went to dinner and afterward I said, "Let's go to a comic book shop." So we walked in, and I said, "Look, this is you. I'm writing the screenplay, and this is going to be you." We bought all the trade paperbacks, and I gave them to him, and he calls me later and he says, "I love this character!"

I'd love to live in Hellboy Land for the rest of my natural life!

GUILLERMO DEL TORO

How did Selma Blair get involved

Selma was not my first choice—she was my *only* choice! I liked her very much as a very dark, very deep presence. And Liz [Sherman] in the comics is never fully fleshed out. You see her in one adventure, and then she's comatose [*Laughs*]. And Mike was thinking of killing her off! But for me, Liz captured my imagination. And I felt the greatest possible arc for the backbone of the movie would be a love story between a guy that is inflammable and a girl that's made of fire!

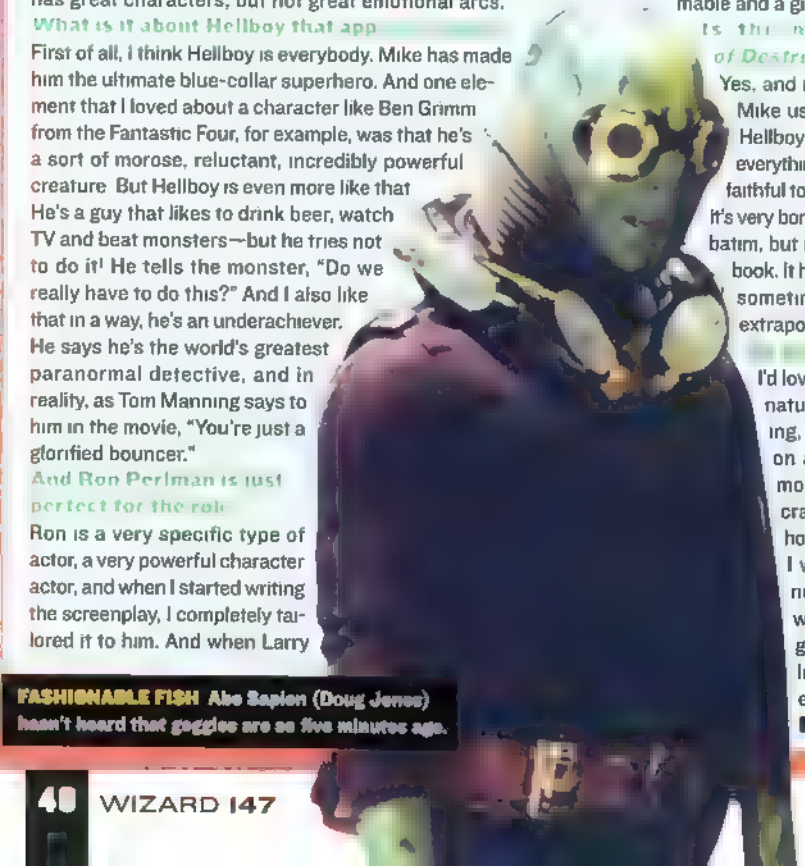
Is the movie loosely based on *Seeds of Destruction*

Yes, and it has a lot of elements from other stories. Mike used to refer to *Seeds of Destruction* as the Hellboy movie, because it gives you the origin and everything. When I see an adaptation that is absolutely faithful to the book to the point of castrating the movie, it's very boring. If you see "Lord of the Rings," it's not verbatim, but it is the best movie you can make from that book. It has the spirit. But sometimes you paraphrase, sometimes you make analogies, sometimes you extrapolate, and that's what this movie is about.

Can you see yourself doing sequels?

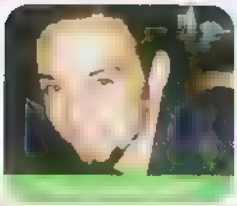
I'd love to live in "Hellboy Land" for the rest of my natural life! The fact is, I approach movies saying, "I'm going to have fun." The first impulse on any movie has never been, "Can I make money? Can I gain reputation?" None of that crap that is pure Hollywood. And I tell you, how can you not have fun on a Hellboy movie? I would love to do *Wolves of Saint August* next, and I would love to mix and match it with other storylines. I told Mike that if we go for a second movie, I would love to go for like a super extravaganza. And definitely end up with the *Conqueror Worm*! [*Laughs*]

■ **RICHARD HO**



FASHIONABLE FISH Abe Sapien (Doug Jones) hasn't heard that goggles are so five minutes ago.

queer eye FOR THE SUPER-GUY



Think the average straight guy is a fashion emergency? Consider the dilemma of the straight superhero. The capacity for looking ridiculous gets exponentially higher when you wear your underwear outside your pants. With a bow to Bravo, we've asked our own Fab Three—gay comics creators Phil Jimenez (*Wonder Woman, New X-Men*), José Villarrubia (*Promethea, The Mirror of Love*) and Robert Rodi (*Elektra, The Crossovers*)—to lend a much-needed hand to some long-time characters whose images would be boosted less by a high-profile crossover than a haute-couture makeover.

LUKE CAGE

JV Our first subject is known both as Hero for Hire and Power Man. He's a street-level crimefighter, working out of the inner city. He's big, he's strong and he repels bullets.

He's a badass. Is it still street to say "badass"?

Okay, first things first. Even in a world where Thor wears feathers on his silver skullcap, would any self respecting black man wear Luke Cage's yellow blouse?

Would any self-respecting black *woman*?

Cage is arguably the best-looking member of our little group of straight superheroes. He has a body of death—and should show it off.

JV Right. The guy is built like a Terminator and the world should know it. So ditch the baggy clothes. Hideous.

I wouldn't recommend we swap size 50-inch-waist pants for that blousy yellow shirt. Hell, no—tighten those pants, show off your assets, tell the world what you've got. Cage should be somewhere between Versace and *Vibe* magazine. And shave the man's head, 'cause *nothing's* sexier than a gorgeous bald black man.

And while we're at it, we can ditch his pretty little tiara.

JV I like the idea of a beret, though. A beret and classic sunglasses.

Maybe Ray-Bans. Something so long past cool, they're cool.

His jacket should be something with an almost sharkskin texture—something slightly reflective, even more dynamic than simple leather. But...those pants would indeed be leather, and tight around the booty, to show it off to full effect.

JV Keep the leather, trash the polyester!

He works the streets, though, so he can't look too shiny, too overdone, too gay. No one would take him seriously. So under the mid-thigh jacket and those leather pants are some boots that'll kill you if he stomps you with 'em, understand?

JV Absolutely. Trash his old Corsair boots while you're at it.

That's a Luke Cage I'd want to draw.

MARTIAN MANHUNTER

PJ: Our second subject is DC's first bona fide Silver Age hero. He's another big guy, with about eight zillion superpowers. What's more, he's green, and he wears blue trunks and red suspenders!

I gotta wonder, if the guy who designed this mess knew it was going to still be around 50 years later, would he have tried a little harder?

JV: Okay, this guy is a shapeshifter. So why, if he can look like anything, does he look like a jolly green giant Cro-Magnon man? He doesn't look all that jolly to me.

PJ: The Martian Manhunter is an alien who doesn't really hide the fact that he's an alien much—just his green skin and bad Martian fashion sense.

JV: I'd change the green skin in a heartbeat. It's a holdover from the 1950s, when everyone just assumed Martians would naturally be green.

PJ: Also, J'Onn's perceptions would be as alien as the shapes he takes. If you're gonna look like a man (or woman), go all the way—pick a human form and stick with it. If not—and I don't think a being that can become *anything* would—then he should meld the most positive looks of every human, alien, male and female he's become.

JV: Yeah! Androgyny rules.

Also, the name "Martian Manhunter" isn't going to get him any respect these days. "Oooh, he's *Martian!*" The original "Manhunter from Mars" has a more commanding rhythm. But why not just drop his ethnicity entirely?

JV: It's *so* un-P.C. to keep harping on it.

Just call him "Manhunter." None of the other characters with that name are around anymore, so it's available. And it's simple and classic.

AQUAMAN

Our next subject is the oldest in the bunch—having been around since the 1940s. He's the King of the Sea, and sometimes, the King of Atlantis ...it's hard to keep track.

PJ: Oh, don't get me started on the tragedy that is Aquaman's costume—or his world—as currently depicted in comics. [*Pauses*] Okay, go ahead. Get me started.

Phil, you have something to share with the class?

PJ: What Aquaman needs is a costume that doesn't make folks instantly think of the guy sitting in Wonder Woman's invisible jet on the "Super Friends," waiting for something to do.

JV: Or a grown-up wearing children's pajamas.

PJ: The costume, created of magical organisms that are attuned to Aquaman's telepathic control, shift and shape themselves into royal robes, armor or a superhero uniform as Aquaman needs them. On a diplomatic mission at the United Nations, for example, Aquaman's royal uniform might shift from meeting to meeting, answering the cultural needs of the dignitaries he's meeting. His armor might transform to accommodate war against aliens or Atlantean rebels. One other thing—keep those blond tresses short!

JV: The "Fabio of the Sea" look was *over* before it began.

I actually like long hair on men; but in this case, I see your point. As a swimmer, he'd need his vision clear, and as a fighter, he wouldn't want those long locks wafting into his face.

PJ: Also, swimmers tend to be all chest, arms and shoulders. When drawing Aquaman, you have to remember that he's probably going to be quite top-heavy, and that he stands with a regal demeanor.

JV: Not a "crouching tuna" Wolverine rip-off. *Never*, never cut any of his limbs off again, *pleeez!* And, if you must, give him a synthetic prosthesis that is functional, not a lame-o copy of the "Evil Dead" chainsaw!

THE ANGEL

JV: Next up: the X-Men's resident winged member, who's gone through a number of costume changes since the 1960s.

RR: Here, I think the challenge will be to actually make him look a little *straighter*. I mean, Angel's always seemed gay to me. Maybe it's cause he's *literally* light in the loafers.

PJ: Isn't he a multi-millionaire? Why on Earth would he be wearing a Xena skirt? This guy would be a high-end dresser.

JV: And *not* a cross-dresser!

PJ: He'd have access to the best clothes, the best stylists—and a hell-uva lot better taste than we've seen in comics.

JV: He wouldn't trot off to a costume shop and ask for a homemade version of a *Final Fantasy* rip-off costume!

PJ: Plus, Angel's a flyer—he's got those enormous wings, he flies at high altitudes at 70-150 miles per hour, and his bones are hollow like a bird's. The guy would wear something sleek, aerodynamic and designed by the best that money can by.

RR: To my mind, the Angel did have one moment of sartorial glory—the costume Neal Adams designed for him in the late '60s. If you accept that Adams is "the best that money can buy" (and it could be argued) then that costume meets all of your criteria.

PJ: Agreed. So our job here is easier—a simple modification of that look, with a few concessions to 21st-century fashion.

JV: And while we're at it, let's ditch the long hair.

RR: Maybe they were just trying to make him look like a Botticelli angel.

JV: Yeah, but those angels didn't wear anything at all.

RR: You're right. And is it me, or were they just a tad fat?

Having made a dent in solving the fashion disasters of the straight superhero set, the Fab Three move on to an seriously style challenged group: straight supervillains.

CAPTAIN BOOMERANG

PJ: First bad guy—in every sense—on the list: a classic con from the pages of *The Flash*.

JV: Captain Boomerang. Accent on the "Boo."

PJ: Like all of the early Flash villains, Captain Boomerang has traditionally worn a super-gay costume that's an embarrassment, even by Rogues Gallery standards.

RR: This guy's look is so hideous, I'm amazed his boomerangs actually return to him.

JV: When coming up with a look for a new Flash villain, somebody had the great idea that he should wear a *really* scary costume...that of a '60s-era stewardess! Watch out, world...here comes Captain Boomerang asking "Aisle or window?"

RR: Window, please. If only to jump out of at the sight of him.

JV: While his cyan overseas cap nicely covers Digger's receding hairline and proudly displays a pin with his insignia (the—duh!— boomerang), it fails miserably at making him look even remotely military.

RR: I always wondered about that. What's with all these super-guys calling themselves "Captain This" and "Major That," when it's shockingly clear they've never even been "Private Anything"? No military titles without a military record, please.

PJ: Updating his look requires looking at Digger Harkness, the man beneath the blue tunic, and giving him a uniform that maintains its colorful ties to the Flash while making sense for a guy raised in the outback. Gone are the boots and the scarf; in their place, a uniform with compartments for his various boomerangs. Hard boots and a much less flashy tunic help.

RR: Sort of Crocodile Dundee by way of Dolce & Gabbana. And I'd add some face paint—traditional Aboriginal markings, to pay homage to the people who started throwing boomerangs in the first place.

BARON ZEMO

RR Finally, the perfidious, insidious and stylistically hideous foe of Captain America. Sporting a full-face mask to hide the damage done to his face when he fell into a vat of "Adhesive X."

PJ All I have to say is, anyone stupid enough to fall into a vat of Adhesive X, survive, and then wear that outfit, deserves anything that happens to him.

JV Leave it to a Nazi "baron" to rediscover ermine, the weasel fur which has not been worn since Louis XIV. I guess, after Zemo survived the almost-fatal accident of having a tacky hot-pink mask permanently super-glued to his head, he tried to distract attention from it by wearing a tacky gold crown and an ermine-trimmed purple outfit. Good choice, *dahling*! You look *mahvellous*!

RR I don't know. There's something about it that, to me, screams Vivienne Westwood. [EDITOR'S NOTE: *A famous Hollywood designer; we had to look it up, too.*]

JV: But wait, there's more! That was the *original* Baron Zemo, now dead. His son, Helmut, has now picked up the ermine-lined mantle. He changed the placement of the royal rodent fur, but kept daddy's impeccable fashion sense, turning the crown into a golden tiara with earmuffs.

PJ Earmuffs with tiaras is *always* wrong.

RR Is there anything the matter with Junior Zemo's face?

[*Silence all around*]

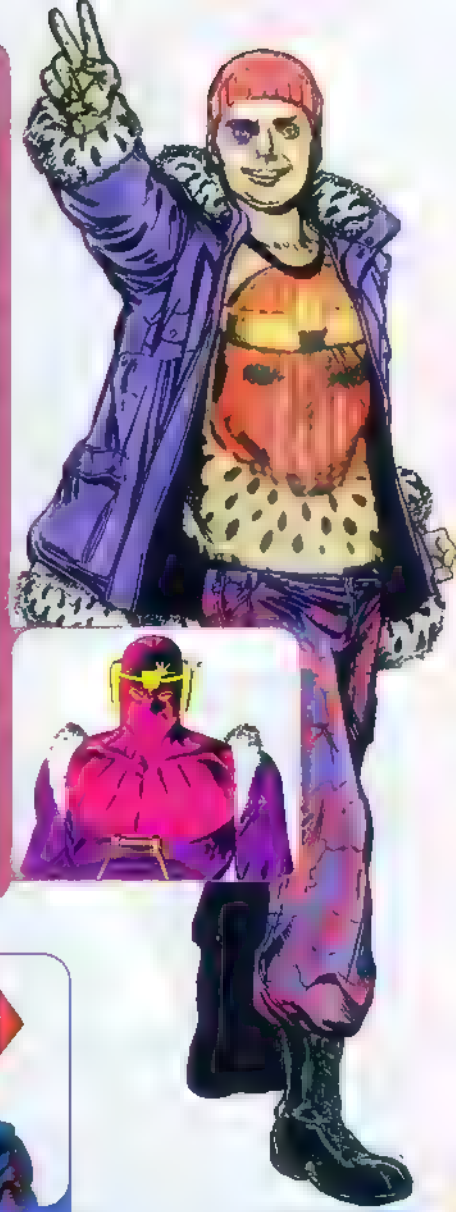
RR Presuming there's not, let's ditch the veil, then. And all the headgear that goes with it. It's time for Baron Zemo to embrace his inner hunk!

JV: Agreed! And since he's only doing the supervillain gig because his father did, I think it's time he gave it up and found his own way in the world.

RR I see him as a hip-hop artist. I think we're ready for a rapper with a German accent. He can call himself Baron Z. Or B.Z. Or B-Zee.

PJ How about just plain Zemo?

JV: Perfect! And the best part is, he can wear almost the same costume. Only now, he'll be wearing it *ironically*.



GALACTUS

JV: We have time for one more. How about Galactus, devourer of worlds?

RR: Hm. Terrible diet aside, can we *really* say he's straight?

JV: Can we really say he's *not*?

RR And he's such a *tall* drink of water. Hard to do anything with him.

PJ Not necessarily. Isn't everyone supposed to perceive him differently?

JV: So all we have to do is figure out how he'd look to us, huh?

ALL *Hmmm...*

Well...apparently some super-straights are more salvageable than others. In fact, loyal reader, if you can think of any superhero who could benefit from the Fab Three's makeover magic, let us know at magicwords@wizarduniverse.com, *where you can also read a full transcript with all of their comments. We just might unleash their talents for another round!*

THE ULTIM

EVIL DEEDS
99 KITTEN BASEBALL
54 KIDNEY P
SWIMMING AFTER EATING
23 NOT TIPP
NOT FLOSSING
16 TRIPLE-M
74 MATTRESS DETAGGING
8 "SASS M
69 POWER PACK SWIRLIES
2 SHIV MA
DOWNLOADING MUSIC
1 UPPER D
STEVE
PETE
TONY
THOR
SERGI

MATE TEST

Think you know Marvel's Ultimate Universe? We quiz your knowledge to see if you're a Bendis or a bust!

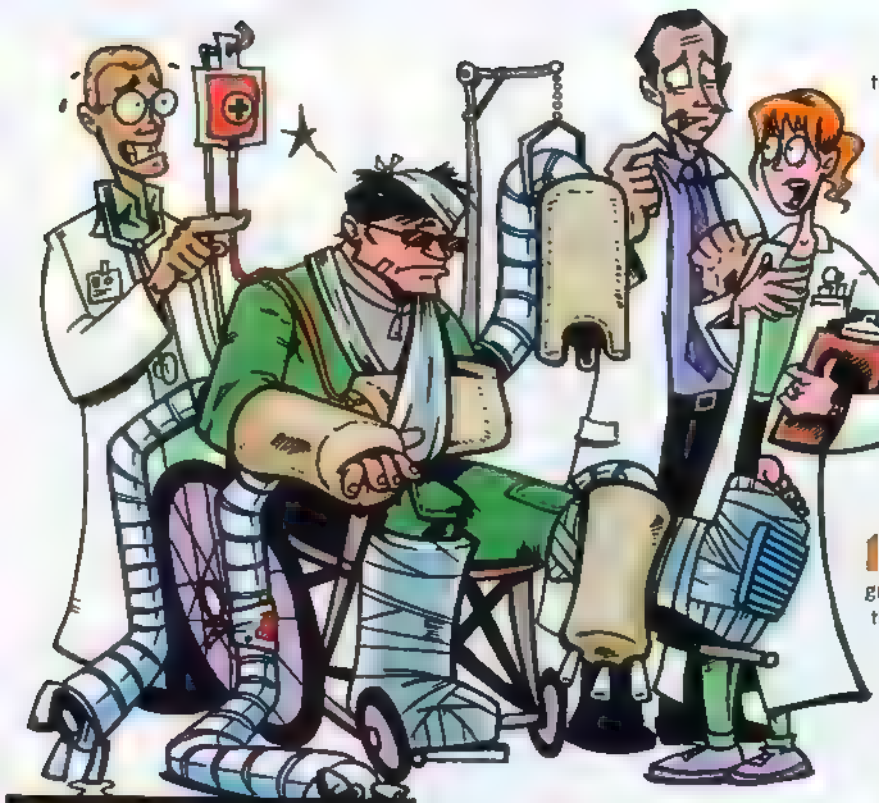
By Jake Rossen and the Wizard Staff

Illustrations by Ryan Dunlavey

Are you ready for Ultimate Alex Trebek? For this spin-off of the world-famous WizCAT (Wizard Comic Aptitude Test), we've assembled a titanic compilation of brain-smelting questions designed to test your knowledge of all things Ultimate Marvel.

Think you know all there is to know about alternate-reality reboots of your favorite comic icons? We've poured over every ink-scented Ultimate issue, not only to get a great high, but in order to execute one mighty demanding quiz. We're not just talking about the mandatory *Ultimate Spider-Man*, *Ultimate X-Men* and *Ultimates* questions, either: We cherry-picked trivia tidbits from *Ultimate Daredevil & Elektra*, *Ultimate War*, *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up*, *Ultimate Six*, *Ultimate Fantastic Four* and more! Hell, we even dug up an Ultimate Warrior inquiry!

Quick—has the latter ever entered a coma induced by too much tuna and protein shakes? Yes! But you're too slow! No points for you! Now get started! NO WHAMMIES!



DOCS AND OCK Who had to break bad news to Otto Octavius? Check out question #4!

1 Unlike comics, scientific terms are for nerds. What was the official hoity-toity designation of the spider that bit Peter Parker in *Ultimate Spider-Man* #1?

2 Multiple choice question for all you pansies! What celeb does feisty siren Elektra decorate her dorm walls with in *Ultimate Daredevil & Elektra*?

A. David Carradine
B. Bruce Lee
C. Vin Diesel
D. An oiled-up Brian Michael Bendis in a lawn chair (*caliente!*)

3 Way to MacGuyver it, girlfriend! To spring Storm from jail in *Ultimate X-Men* #1, what kind of card does Jean psychically mask as an FBI ID?

4 Telling Dr. Octopus there's been an "accident" at Osborn Industries and he's now a super-freak fat kid with six arms is fun BUT hazardous to your health. Who had the unfortunate duty of breaking the bad news to him?

5 Name at least two SHIELD agents who have appeared in *Ultimate Six*, and have therefore made some use of their pitifully inconsequential existences.

6 Hot Topic shoppers: find some taste. Which of these pop-culture emblems has Peter Parker not worn on a T-shirt?

A. Thunderbolts logo
B. Cartman from "South Park"
C. Fantastic Four logo
D. Thundercats logo

7 In *Ultimate X-Men* #1, what job did Colossus have that would've made his momma weep like a sleep-deprived teenage girl in an onion factory?

8 It's Russian Roulette! If all of Colossus turns into an indestructible sheen, this could get interesting. What teammate does Colossus have a crush on?

9 "Re-imaginings" don't always need to take a step from the past. What was the name of the first original (i.e. exclusive to the Ultimate Universe) villain in *Ultimate Spider-Man*?

10 Human experimentation. It's the gift that keeps on giving. What was the name of the genetic project developed by Osborn Industries that gave Spider-Man his powers, and what was it originally designed for?

11 Besides going to Japan, what must Giant-Man be careful not to do under penalty of death?

12 How was Ultimate Professor X paralyzed? (Hint: It stung.)

13 SNAP INTO A SLIM JIM! We know that Peter Parker started eating turnbuckle for the cash, but why did he need it?

14 Which of these characters was not on the first Brotherhood of Mutants roster, and therefore definitely not part of the "In" crowd?

A. Scarlet Witch
B. The Blob
C. Mastermind
D. Sabretooth

15 Omitting anything mumbled over a sixer, by what name did Captain America know Wolverine during World War II, as revealed in the *Ultimate War* mini-series?

16 Speaking of sixers, who do the X-Men save from the Brotherhood in *Ultimate X-Men* #3?

17 Sharp dressers equal sharp players. How many different costumes has Peter Parker worn in *Ultimate Spider-Man*? Wait, let's make this even harder: name 'em, too.

18 Ay, *mon ami*! Dat ees one nice hal-tar top, no? What reject Dick Tracy villain does Gambit recover a kidnapped girl from in *Ultimate X-Men* #25?
DOUBLE-SECRET PROBATION POINTS Who was the creep working for?

19 Thank God the guy never met Jean-Claude Van Damme. How did Nightcrawler learn English?

20 We could just ask some old ladies, but they smell funny and keep offering us cake. Anyway, how did the Beast turn blue?

21 Somehow, we don't think the Brooklyn Apathetics sounds quite right. What's the name of Peter Parker's high school basketball team?

22 After battling his own son, Professor X throws a hissy and decides to close down the school. A conversation with what person changes his mind?

23 Baby powder? Sure. SpongeBob undies? Check. Amputee porn? Cued up. What else does Tony Stark, the Ultimates' favorite womanizer, need before he suits up as Iron Man?

24 *Mas hombre iron!* As if spazzing around in a soup can wasn't bad enough, what ailment does Tony Stark suffer from?

25 Aunt May's heels made him look fab-u-lous, but Parker needed a sleeker look to intimidate street hoods. Where did Spider-Man get his first costume?

26 Speaking of Spidey costumes, what issue number of *Ultimate Spidey* was it where he finally spandexed out?
TRIPLE TOUGH BONUS BONANZA What issue did Spidey get web lines in his costume and Mark Bagley's free ride ended?

27 God, can't a guy disappear for a few decades and not have his lady sweat the sheets with his homey? When Captain America is revived in the modern day, what has happened to his World War II sweetheart?

28 Which member of the original Ultimates team is a dirty, filthy, stinkin' mutant?

29 Before nambypants Eddie Brock became the salivating and homicidal Venom, what was his relation to Peter Parker?

30 Don't yield, back SHIELD! So what's the name of their headquarters?

31 More one-eyed trivia: What is Ultimate Nick Fury's military rank?

32 Which of the following artists didn't contribute to the *Ultimate Spider-Man Super Special*?

A. Mark Bagley
B. John Romita Sr.
C. Jim Mahfood
D. Terry Dodson

33 Name at least two mutants that were introduced as members of the Weapon X program in the second *Ultimate X-Men* storyarc, "Return to Weapon X."

THE REAL McCOY Did creepy little French cartoon characters turn the Beast blue? Find out with question #20!

34 What does Beast use to slow down Hawkeye and the soldiers chasing him in *Ultimate War* #4? (It ain't big words.)

35 Besides a mint, what did Mary Jane and Peter give Logan to eat at Peter's house in *Ultimate X-Men* #34?

36 What character did not appear in an issue of *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up*?

A. Dr. Strange
B. Man-Thing
C. Captain America
D. Shang-Chi

37 What was Ultimate Elektra's sensei's name?

38 What new ability does batcrap insane Norman Osborn reveal in *Ultimate Six* #2?

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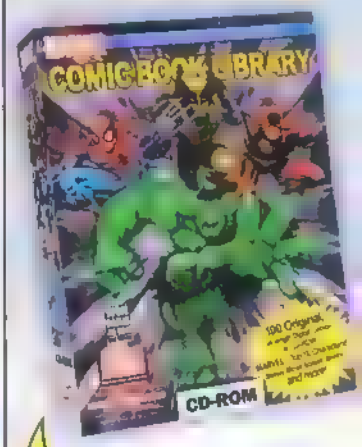

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- CAPTAIN AMERICA (1964)
- AVENGERS (1963)
- NAMOR THE SUB-MARINER (1962)
- IRON MAN (1963)
- SILVER SURFER (1966)

* ONLY WOLVERINE, NIGHT CRAWLER, COLOSSUS AND STORM MADE THEIR DEBUT IN GIANT SIZE X-MEN #1

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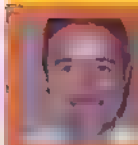
STAY AFTER SCHOOL

The 'Ultimate' writers take the Ultimate Marvel Quiz



[redacted]

Writer of *Ultimates* and the *Ultimate War* mini, co-writer on *Ultimate Fantastic Four*, former writer of *Ultimate X-Men*

GRADE:

PERCENTAGE OF ANSWERS HE THOUGHT WE GOT [redacted]G:

"I rarely get a chance to read any of the Ultimate books I don't write," admits Millar. "I was pretty sure that Bendis would kick my ass. I did know more of these than I thought I would, though."

[redacted]

Writer of *Ultimate Spider-Man*, *Ultimate X-Men* and the *Ultimate Six* mini, co-writer on *Ultimate Fantastic Four*, former writer of *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up*

[redacted]

PERCENTAGE OF ANSWERS HE THOUGHT WE GOT WRONG:

"I'm pretty sure that Mark cheated on the quiz," says sore loser Bendis. "He's at home digging through comics, and I'm stuck in a hotel outside Las Vegas. I'm not even sure he's ever read an issue of *Ultimate Spider-Man*."

MIKE COTTON

39 Uh-oh...erratic teenage girl mood swing alert! What event pushes Mary Jane to her breaking point, causing her to dump Peter in *Ultimate Spider-Man* #37?

40 What is sweaty, gasping, twitching Ultimate Matt Murdock doing the first time Elektra lays eyes on him?

41 In *Ultimate X-Men* #25, them no-good yahoos in the Hellfire Club perform a ceremony to call forth whom?

42 Who headed up the Weapon X program and guaranteed himself a very cozy spot in Hell?

43 He may be clinically deranged, but that doesn't mean the guy can't appreciate some fine art. What is Magneto's favorite painting?

44 Beyond the obvious—that he's susceptible to peer pressure and doesn't like to drink alone—why does Thor eventually join the Ultimates?

45 C'mon, you read the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* #1 preview in *Wizard* #146, right? What kind of science project had Reed Richards put together for the Midtown Middle School Science Fair?

46 Super-tough question we threw in here to make sure no one hits a perfect score: How does MJ start "the letter" she writes to Peter in *Ultimate Spider-Man* #41? (And no, "Dear Pete..." ain't it; we're lookin' for the first few lines.)

47 With Mary Jane and Gwen Stacy, Peter Parker is quite the lady's man. (Heck, we won't even talk about alla them li'l Parkers running around in Mexico.) What Marvel X-cutie has a crush on the webhead?

48 It's as though 1990s guest-spot whoring taught us nothing! Which X-Men are noticeably absent from the first issue of *Ultimate War*?

49 Which Marvel Knights title is considered by many to be the first "Ultimate" book?

50 Final question, and just to be d---ks, it's not even really an Ultimate question: In 2002, which regular Marvel Universe title tried to capitalize on the Ultimate franchise by featuring an Ultimate-style cover?

Think you've proven your knowledge of all things Ultimate Marvel? Then head to ***www.wizarduniverse.com*** *for more Ultimate Trivia!*

PARKER POSERS Did Spidey wear all of these crazy costumes? Question #17 can help.

ANSWERS 1. OO 2. B Bruce Lee 3. Blockbuster Video ("Wow, what a dirt-bag!") card. 4. Henry Pym and Scott Lang. 5. Clay Quartermain. Sharon Carter. Nick Fury. Agent Cobb. Agent Tucci. 6. E. Fantastic Four logo. 7. Arms dealer to the Russian mafia. 8. Wolverine. 9. Bullpit. 10. D. "...was designed to be the Super Soldier serum." 11. He mustn't grow over 60 feet or eat anything while enlarged. 12. Magneto. "an 8 inch tool through his spine." 13. Flash Thompson was suing Peter Parker's landlord. 14. D. Sabretooth. 15. James "Lucky Jim" Howlett. 16. The President's daughter. 17. 5. Original wrestling costume (#3) Spider-Man costume (#4) Venom costume (#14) Basket costume (#40) Basket jersey costume (#41) 18. Hammerhead. BONUS Mr. Sinister. 19. Front cover version and "stepping" 20. When he was critically injured. Jean and Peter X -ed the minds of and followed the procedures of scientists doing a rare transplant procedure on spider monkeys that had the side effect of turning fur blue or less than 1% of the cases. 21. The Midtown High Tigers 22. A mind wiped Eric Lindsay. a.k.a. Magneto. 23. A drunk. 24. Brain tumor. 25. The wrestling promoter gave it to him. 26. Issue #3. BONUS: #5. 27. She's married to Dap-r old partner Bucky who's still alive! 28. Wasp 29. Since their fathers worked together they were childhood friends. 30. The Kitchen. 31. Four star General. 32. D. Terry Dodson. 33. Nightcrawler. Rogue. Juggernaut. 34. A dancer. com simulation of Dmitrodov Jewish virginia. 35 Mozza ball soup 36. C. Captain America. 37 Master Stone. 38. He can change into the Green Goblin without his O2 serum. 39. MJ keeps having dreams that she's being dropped from the bridge. 40. Gymnastics. 41 The Phoenix. In the body of Jean Grey. 42 John Wraith. 42. Le Chateau Des Pyrenees' by Magritte. (#27) (it's a painting of a big floating rock with a city on top that's like Asteroid M turns out to look. 44 "Fuck question" So far he hasn't ultimately hooked the team only responding in times of crises. 45 "Teleportation. 46. "Peter. I. got the guts to ever hand you this. Peter I'm just going to come out and say it. I totally love you." 47 Shadowcat (Kitty Pryde). 48. All of them. 49. Marvel Boy. 50. Captain Marvel #35

MARK MILLAR

With an 'Ultimates' relaunch set for '04, the Scottish writer plays God in December with four new books...including a reboot of Jesus Christ

WIZARD How'd you convince Image, Top Cow, Dark Horse and Avatar to participate in your four new "Millarworld" titles in December, which all take place in the same universe?

MILLAR. Marvel and DC are always going to want to promote the characters they own. The only way to do it was to make it as big an event as possible and an inter-company crossover was the biggest thing I could think of.

This "Millar World" line is really your first step in taking over the world, isn't it?

Yeah, I'm going for Iraq next. The situation there's getting out of control.

So what are the four books about?

Avatar's publishing *The Unfunnies*—think of it as "Magnolia" for the "Scooby Doo" generation. If you ever wanted to see a cartoon character masturbate then this is your chance. It's supposed to look like a really bad '70s cartoon meant to really, really get under your skin and give you a very bad feeling.

Then there's Top Cow's *Wanted*.

What started with *The Authority* and became *The Ultimates*, has evolved into *Wanted*. It stars a guy who's an assh--- that finds out he's part of this supercriminal organization through his inheritance and can do anything he wants. He's basically told, "Do whatever you want. You can kill, rape, rob anybody you like and it won't even make the newspaper. We run the show."

And then there's Ultimate Jesus, right?

Chosen—from Dark Horse—is my idea for Ultimate Jesus. See, the Marvel Universe is 40 years old and people complain that they can't read the books, so we did the Ultimate line to make it nice and simple. There's over 2,000 years of continuity with the Bible, and you've got Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, Mormons, Presbyterians and Baptists arguing about it, and I think it's time for a revamp with an Ultimate Bible. I always saw the Bible as a trilogy. The Old Testament is "Star Wars." The New Testament is "Empire Strikes Back" and it has a great cliffhanger because the lead guy—Han Solo—seems to die at the end. So *Chosen* would be "Return of the Jedi." This is where the story finishes.

'WANTED' MAN While Millar retools *Ultimates* (right), he creates extreme heroes in *Wanted* (above).

What about the one-shots from Image Central?

It's a series of short stories based on superhero concepts, but these are 21ST Century versions. The first book called *Run!*, which Ashley Wood draws, is all about super-speed, it's about five people, who can all move at the speed of light. But it's darker than the Flash. After that, there'll be an issue by John Cassaday, an issue by Frank Quitely and the fourth one that we can't announce yet.

"Everybody's got their own version of the Bible, and I think it's time for a revamp."

MARK MILLAR ON 'CHOSEN'

You've also got the new Marvel Knights *Spider-Man* title on tap for April, right?

I can't stop writing *Spider-Man*. Even in Mass—it's kind of pathetic—I found myself scribbling ideas for the Vulture on the little bulletins you get. Bendis says to me, "Spider-Man is just the greatest character to write, and you'll see what I mean," and he's right.

Finally, what's the deal with *The Ultimates* vol. 2 next year? Will it kick ass?

Issue #1 takes place about a year after *Ultimates* #13, and we look at how this group has changed. Captain America is dating the Wasp, and Hank Pym is totally off the team. Then Iron Man's much sicker now because he has that brain tumor; he's going through chemotherapy and he really wants to marry Black Widow, who has 13 other very wealthy dead husbands.

She really *is* a Black Widow...

Well, Cap tells Tony, "Hey, wait a minute. Let's think about this." But Tony just wants to marry her before he dies, he thinks it's just a long string of coincidences.

And there's big stuff with the Hulk too, right?

Oh yeah, someone leaks that Bruce Banner is the Hulk and the public is furious that he killed 800 people and the government is protecting him. So, the first big arc covers the trial of the Hulk and the Ultimates versus Thor.

What?

They find out some very interesting things about Thor. Let's just say he's not what anyone thinks. Is he the Odinson made flesh or is he a psychopath with a scary hammer? All will be revealed. But you will see a number of new Ultimate characters from Europe, like Ultimate Captain Britain. ■ **MIKE COTTON**

LAST

CLOSING TIME No matter what the cover, we'd knock back a few pints in Alan Moore's pub any time.

CALL

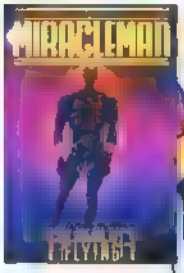
Preparing for retirement, comic genius Alan Moore reflects on his biggest successes and accomplishments, from his deconstruction of superheroes in 'Watchmen' to why he can't stand 'The Killing Joke'

By Mike Cotton
Original art opener by
David Finch and Art Thibert

WHEN ALAN MOORE, NEARING 50, STARES INTO A MIRROR, HE sees the imperfections of age: the lines on his face where smooth skin once lay, the grey hairs and the lengthy beard that could probably use a trim. What Moore's fans see is perfection—or as close to it as a comic book writer has come in the last 20 years. The fans see an innovator, a legend and a genius. ■ But now, as he stands on the verge of giving up mainstream comic scripting—and sporting one of the most impressive résumés in the medium—the charming, Northampton-based writer can only grimace when anyone brings up the word "genius." ■ "In the 21st century, when anyone who has made a halfway decent film or cut a halfway decent pop track or has a halfway decent comic, he's described as a genius," says Moore with a little blush. "You'd have to say that the word has been devalued. I'm a very good comic writer, and I'm a pretty good writer, but I'm not exactly sure what 'genius' means and don't particularly pay a great need to wanting to be one. It's certainly not how I see myself. If anyone else wants to sort of see me as a genius, then it's up to them, and that's terribly flattering, but I can't say that it's something that I really think about one way or the other." ■ To celebrate—and please forgive us, Mr. Moore—the genius of one of the greatest comic writers to ever live, *Wizard* persuaded Moore to take a look in his rearview mirror and analyze his own career, project by project. So here he is—Alan Moore in his own words on his greatest projects, from one of his few Superman stories to *The Killing Joke* to the creation of the ABC line and the only comic he intends to ever return to—*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

MARVELMAN

(*Warrior Magazine*, 1982-1984)



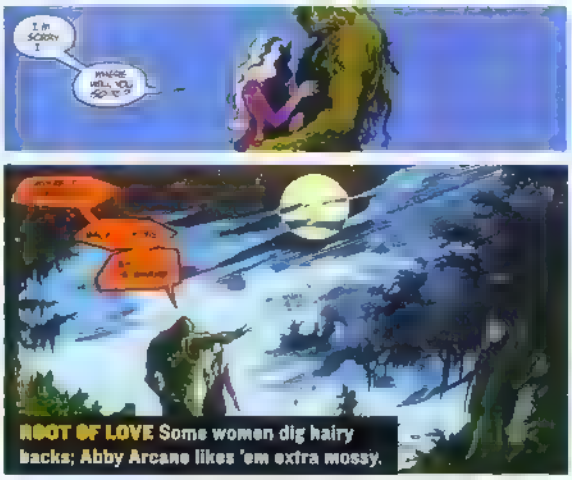
After decades of nonuse, Marvelman *(retitled* Miracleman *in U.S. reprints) was reinvigorated by Moore as an aging hero who'd forgotten the magic word that transformed him from his alter ego of Mike Moran into the powerful Shazam-like Marvelman. Bringing a realistic slant to one of the few British superheroes, Moore focused on adult stories as Marvelman's kid sidekick, Kid Marvelman, returns to destroy his former partner and obliterates most of London in the process.*

I'd got some idea of doing a *Mad* style parody of *Marvelman*, and I thought, "I could have the central gag of it could be that he's forgotten his magic word, and that he just can't remember what it is." Then I forgot about the idea. I mean, back then, I was a 12-year-old boy and I'd have 10 impractical ideas every day, but as I grew up and it came to the early 1980s, I'd had this idea of doing a more real world version of Marvelman that, in my head, had started to grow from a simple knockoff parody into something that I realized could actually be quite poignant.

We wrote the first story with this event that jars his memory and he suddenly remembers that he was this absurd '50s superhero, and then, as we unwrapped the story, we tried to do so in a way that would make this a completely new Marvelman, a much more dramatic character, and the strip [in England's *Warrior Magazine*] mostly achieved its power by the juxtaposition of this simple and not terribly good, if truth be told, superhero that came from a '50s British knockoff of Captain Marvel and that really hadn't had anything going for him apart from the fact that he was one of the very, very few homegrown British superheroes.

So we took the ball, ran with it and *Marvelman* was the result. *Marvelman* is definitely the first time that I had realized the possibilities of this new approach to superheroes, science fiction and fantasy characters, and I would later apply it more thoroughly with things like *Watchmen*.

KIMOTA! It's either Marvelman's magic word or a brand new deodorant that's got him excited about fighting wetness.



ROOT OF LOVE Some women dig hairy backs; Abby Arcane likes 'em extra mossy.

SWAMP THING

(DC Comics, 1984-1987)

Moore jumpstarted DC Comics' Swamp Thing *with issue #21's "The Anatomy Lesson," which enlightened fans to the fact that Swamp Thing wasn't former scientist Alec Holland but a plant god that thought it was Holland. With stories that focused on the environment to nuclear proliferation to the horrors of the occult, the title emerged as one of the most intellectually stimulating and terrifying comics of the '80s, paving the way for DC's Vertigo line. Eventually, Moore's sometimes heartbreaking,*

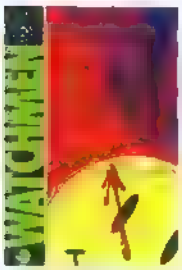
sometimes horrifying stories became so sophisticated, DC labeled the series with a "For Mature Readers" tag, a move that led Moore to exit the book.

DC had nothing to lose. I got [*Swamp Thing*] in much the same way as Frank Miller got the *Daredevil* gig. *Daredevil* was selling about 15,000 [copies] when they gave it to this weird, lanky guy from Vermont and I think that it was the same as giving it to this weird guy from England. It was like saying, "Even if they're lousy, how bad can it be? The book is on the verge of cancellation anyway. They can't do anything to make it worse."

Swamp Thing wasn't only about anxiety. There are some very joyous and loving issues of *Swamp Thing*. It was not a wholly dark experience. It was the ratings thing that eventually caused me to split with DC. That was how strongly I felt about it. I didn't think that I needed permission. I was just trying to do the best comic possible and I didn't think that you needed permission for that.

WATCHMEN

(DC Comics, 1986-1987)



Moore's seminal work—widely considered the best mainstream superhero comic book ever written—continued the writer's deconstruction of the superhero genre in a story that redefined comics for a generation of readers and illustrated how a society corrupts some of its heroes and turns others into gods. Using the 1960s Charlton Comics characters—Captain Atom, the Question, Judomaster, Peacemaker and Blue Beetle—as inspiration, Moore crafted a story of heroes in their twilight searching for one of their former colleagues, who's hatched a plan to murder them and rule the world.

The idea came together of me and Dave [Gibbons] working on something. We tossed around a few ideas: Challengers of the Unknown, Martian Manhunter. Then there was a suggestion that we do something with the Charlton characters. Our initial synopsis was perhaps darker and a more gritty story. That's when DC started to get cold feet about the Charlton angle. I soon realized that we could probably come up with something better by coming up with our own versions of the Charlton characters, some of which were kind of bland. I was still telling a dark but very stylish superhero story.

RORSCHACH TEST The Minutemen's resident masked vigilante was always a sore loser when it came to games like "Paper, Rock, Scissors" and "Potatoes."

I think that in *Watchmen*, somehow, we expressed something about the zeitgeist of the middle 1980s. And while it was very specifically about those times, with Cold War terror hanging over all of us, a certain nuclear nervousness that pervaded the decade, I think that it was also about broader, less specific human issues of power and responsibility, which probably account for the fact that today, 16 or 17 years later, *Watchmen* is still selling regularly and doing wonderfully well. I should imagine there are probably several people who've gone through two or three paperback collections by now.

The opening pages of issue three, where you've got the pirate comic book, and the news vendor talking about an impending war, that's when I realized that this was something very interesting, and that we should push as much as possible. It seemed to us that we were breaking through into new storytelling techniques. To me, that is the most important thing about *Watchmen*. It's not the story, it's not the redefinition of superheroes. It's the way in which we approached comics.

We suddenly realized that the limits of the medium, at least as far as we understood them, could be pushed further back. I am a little tired of talking about *Watchmen*, though. Not to take anything away from the work itself; I'm still immensely proud of it. But every conceivable question that you could imagine regarding *Watchmen*, and even some I'm sure that no normal person could conceive of easily, I have been asked upon a number of occasions. It's a great work, I'm very proud of it, but it was 17 years ago. And for me, the work I'm most interested in is always the one that is on the typewriter at this very moment.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE MAN OF TOMORROW?

(DC Comics, 1986)

Considered one of the best Superman stories ever told, "Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?" [Superman #423 and Action Comics #583] closed the door on pre-Crisis Superman. In a poignant and touching love letter to his favorite childhood character, Moore dutifully wrapped up all the loose plot threads from almost 50 years of Superman stories. Focusing on the Man of Steel's final battles with his biggest foes—such as Lex Luthor, Brainiac and Bizarro—"Man of Tomorrow" served as a perfect end to Superman's Silver Age continuity and set the stage for a new Modern Age of stories starring the character.

When [former Superman editor] Julie [Schwartz] asked me if I wanted to write those last two *Superman* sto-

DOG DAYS Superman just had the bottled city of Kandor cleaned when Krypto made a mess on it.

ries, he specifically wanted a story that tied all of the loose [Silver Age] ends of that whole Superman continuity. Did he love Lois or Lana the most? What about the roster of supervillains, and all of these other characters; what happened to them? I know that Julie liked the story, and I know that Julie has somewhere, probably at a rash moment, when his medication needed adjusting or something, said it was his favorite, and that it was probably the best Superman story that he'd ever commissioned. And it probably wasn't. The main person that I was trying to please was Superman. This was a character that had been very dear to me when I was growing up. As far as I was concerned, this was the final, real Superman story, and I wanted to make it a beauty. I wanted to give him a good send-off that the character himself, as I understood him, would've appreciated.

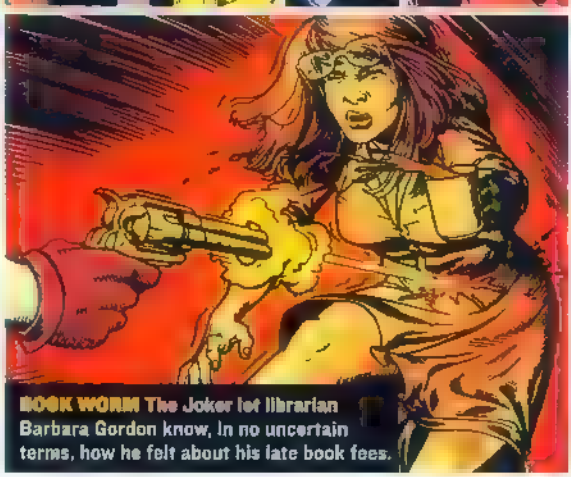
BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE

(DC Comics, 1988)

One of the most violently gruesome Batman stories ever told, The Killing Joke *helped redefine Batman's most well-known foe—the Joker—as a sadistic madman and drove Batman beyond the edge of sanity in a story that crippled Batgirl and changed the Bat-Universe forever. After shooting, molesting and photographing Barbara Gordon, the Joker kidnaps Gotham Police Commissioner Jim Gordon and tries to prove that anyone can be driven insane given the right circumstances. As the Joker pushes Gordon to the limits of sanity by forcing him to watch his daughter's torture, Batman must make a final decision to either kill the Joker or let his madness continue*

I wanted to do something with Brian Bolland and DC suggested a Batman story. Brian's interest was more with the Joker, and I said, "Fine, I'll come up with a story that sort of foregrounds the Joker." So I read up on what was known about the character, what the established continuity was and then, without contradicting that established continuity, I tried to expand it. I tried to give a sense that if the Joker was the Red Hood before he was the Joker, who was he before he was the Red Hood, and how did he come to be the Red Hood?

While Brian's artwork is of obvious spectacular beauty, I'm not very pleased with [the story]. I think that *The Killing Joke*, on the writing side and on the writing side only, is a flawed work. As far as Batman stories go, it's probably one of the better ones, but in terms of my stories, it's one that I'm not overly fond of because I don't think that ultimately it was about anything. All it was about was making the point that Batman and the Joker share a similar psychosis, which is not very interesting to anyone other than comic fans. At the end of the day, it's one of the works that I'm less interested in than some of the others because it seemed to say too little and to be too explicit and perhaps gratuitous in its method of saying it.



BOOK WORM The Joker let librarian Barbara Gordon know, in no uncertain terms, how he felt about his late book fees.

I asked DC if they had any problem with me crippling Barbara Gordon—who was Batgirl at the time—and if I remember, I spoke to Len Wein, who was our editor on the project, and he said, "Hold onto the phone, I'm just going to walk down the hall and I'm going to ask [former DC Editor-in-Chief] Dick Giordano if it's alright," and there was a brief period where I was put on hold and then, as I remember it, Len got back onto the phone and said, "Yeah, okay, cripple

the bitch." It was probably one of the areas where they should've reined me in, but they didn't

FROM HELL

(Tundra/Kitchen Sink Press, 1991-1998)

An obsessive reconstruction of the Jack the Ripper murders, From Hell *plunges readers into the seedy underside of London with a first-person look at who Moore believes really committed the Ripper murders. Based on detailed research, the story follows the Ripper, and the Scotland Yard detectives pursing him, through the serial killer's five London murders*

Although I wouldn't have said it then, it seems that I probably was always interested in Jack the Ripper. I would have answered that question in the negative up until about 1995 or thereabouts, when I just assumed that I'd not been particularly interested in Jack the Ripper and that I'd been looking for a murder to base a comic book around. And after I'd rejected some other cases, and after initially rejecting the Jack the Ripper story because it was too played out and obvious, I started to take notice of some of the material circulating during the centenary of the crimes in 1988, and I settled upon the Jack the Ripper story then

But when my mother died in the mid-'90s, we were sorting out her house, which included my old room, with a suitcase under the bed with loads of old papers and things like that in it. We found that I had actually collected, probably when I was 12 or 13, a series of articles serialized in one of the Sunday newspapers that were about the Ripper crimes. So even though I'd sort of forgotten about it, there must have been some sort of early interest in the murders

The story was quite demanding. My knowledge of serial killers is a dilettante's knowledge. It's exactly as much knowledge as I needed to have to write a complex book about one particular Victorian crime

LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

(DC/WildStorm, 1999-Present)

The breakout book of his ABC Comics line, League *pulled together some of Moore's favorite literary characters, including adventurer Allan Quatermain, Mina Harker from Bram Stoker's* Dracula, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the Invisible Man and Captain Nemo, into a superteam that defended London long before there were any costumed heroes. Facing Sherlock Holmes' nemesis James Moriarty, set on destroying London from above, as well as a merciless Fu Manchu-like crimelord,* League *spawned a sequel that saw the team fight Martians in a* War of the Worlds *homage*

YOU DON'T KNOW JACK Despite the top hat and long cape, it's almost certain that Jack the Ripper was NOT Liberace.

League was an old idea that had been drifting around from probably around about the mid-'90s. The idea of combining three characters from previous literature in one story together was turning out to be an awful lot of fun on a number of levels. I was thinking about superhero teams, which generally in my opinion don't really work most of the time. But I was wondering whether you could perhaps do something about that by moving the idea back in time, to the late Victorian period. I started thinking about how you might put together a team of Victorian characters. I was wondering who would be in that

Allan Quatermain was an early choice, because he always struck me as an interestingly flawed character, in that he's not particularly brave, even in H. Rider Haggard's original [novel]. Given the fact that Allan Quatermain is probably—well, almost certainly—the inspiration for all of the questing adventure heroes that came after, like Indiana Jones or Lara Croft or any of those people, he was a natural. Captain Nemo, as the first techno-hero, techno-vil-

lain, struck me as another person who was obvious for inclusion. Nemo was a natural, especially when we found out that he was not the original sort of white American that we may have imagined after seeing him played by James Mason. Mr. Hyde, Dr. Jekyll and the Invisible Man are kind of self-explanatory. I mean, they're such wonderful visual characters that it would have been a crime to exclude them.

I was a little perplexed when it came to trying to find a female member of the team, who I really needed for chemistry. But the Victorians had a rather low opinion of women, so there weren't any really sterling heroines that leaped out at you from Victorian fiction. I'd originally considered Irene Adler, who was the only woman that Sherlock Holmes admired. But she's a little obscure; unless you're really hip to Arthur Conan Doyle, you're never going to have heard of her. Mina Harker on the other hand, although she is portrayed in *Dracula* as being something of a new woman, but by and large being a kind of a victim. I thought about it and decided that after the events in *Dracula*, she could have had a complete change to her personality and circumstances. I figured that by winding the tape forward a few months for Mina, that we might have a completely different character.

League has been great fun, though. It's the only ABC book I plan to return to after the middle of next year.

THE ABC LINE

(DC/WildStorm, 1999-2004)

Moore's most recent accomplishment, the America's Best Comics line, represented his last stab at crafting mainstream superhero comics. But this time, he opted to do it his own way. From mystic adventures in Promethea *to scientific super-stories in* Tom Strong *to an "NYPD Blue"-like ensemble crime drama in* Top 10, *Moore spawned an entire line of comics that caught every fan's eye and left readers panting for more.*

When I started the ABC line, I was trying to synthesize a line of comics that, to me, seemed to be what the industry needed at that time. I used various methods to come up with characters that, although they might bear a passing resemblance to superheroes, weren't really drawing upon the same narrow band of influences that most comic book superheroes seem to draw upon. I was kind of looking at the pulp heroes that had preceded those comic book superheroes. I was looking at some of the newspaper strip characters that had preceded the pulp heroes. I was sort of, if you like, running the tape back to a point before *Action Comics* #1, and trying to and imagine how things might have developed if they'd taken a different route.

So with *Tom Strong*, I was looking back to characters like Doc Savage, Tarzan, Captain Future—archetypal pulp characters that actually preceded Superman. With *Promethea*, I was looking back at the heroic female fantasy figures that would feature in stories by C. L. Moore in *Weird Tales* or in the other science fiction pulps. The only thing that was wrong with, say, the Phantom Lady, was that there was nothing, apart from the slightly unfeasible cleavage of the heroine, to interest anybody in the stories at all. With Greyshirt, I was thinking back to what, to my mind, is still some of the very best comic book short stories ever done, which were the ones that [Will] Eisner did in *The Spirit*, which are masterpieces.

And there's not really a vehicle for little, short, brilliantly told or crafted stories like that in today's comic book marketplace. What I was trying to do with ABC comics was to try and create a Noah's Ark, where some of my favorite concepts could be given a sort of a safe passage through the storms that were then assailing the comics industry. It struck me that the only area of the equation that I'd got any kind of control over was the quality of the books. I can't understand or influ-

PARTY CRASHERS The LoEG realized it was time to bounce when Hyde ate most of the cake...*and* the guest of honor!

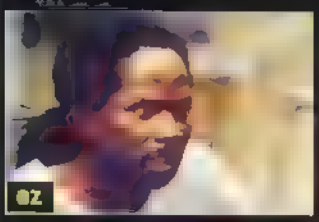
MOORE TV

and must-not-see American TV

innovator, legend, genius and...TV addict?

Alan Moore's at least three of those things, and we have a smoking suspicion about the last. While Moore finds little time for television, or a life, outside of his busy writing schedule, Northampton's resident comic scribe does have his favorite American television shows and, of course, his least favorite.

THE SOPRANOS "'Sopranos' is good, although I'm only up to the fourth season like everybody else [in the U.K]. I'm really hoping that Season Five is going to be the last. If they carry it on indefinitely then I'm going to lose interest in it, no matter how good it is."



OZ "There's not been a series of 'OZ' over here for awhile, which is a shame, because I did look forward to my weekly dose of stabbing and sodomy."

24 "I thought that '24' was sh--. I apologize, but I thought that was just ludicrous. I thought it was a comedy. It seems to be based entirely around the conceit that it is a great idea to do a show in nearly real time. I've not bothered watching the second season. There was his bloody daughter, his career hostage daughter and her unlikely life. How many times can somebody realistically get kidnapped in the space of 24 hours? I think the rest of the show is just about as ridiculous as she is."

SIX FEET UNDER "I appreciate that 'Six Feet Under' is very well-written and acted and all the rest of it, but I don't know, perhaps it's just the undertaker thing. Perhaps I just don't have the immediate sympathy for it as I have for the New Jersey mobster or prison inmate thing."

THE SHIELD "I look forward to 'The Shield'; it's good. It's the Fox cable network's attempt at grabbing at least some of the market that HBO has kind of put together. That's good."

SEX AND THE CITY "I'm afraid that musings about [oral sex] and Manolo Blahnik shoes are a little bit out of my immediate territory."

THE WEST WING "The West Wing' suffers from being clearly derived from the Clinton that everybody wanted, under a Democratic administration. Then the show got kind of bushwhacked, no pun intended, just like the rest of us did, in pretty short order. So the gulf between White House reality and White House fiction just becomes wider and wider and more and more difficult to actually straddle. I was saying recently that I couldn't understand these claims that Martin Sheen wasn't playing the right kind of American president, because I've seen 'The Dead Zone,' and I'd thought he got George Bush completely down."

SOUTH PARK "The cartoons are always good. It's been awhile since we've seen any 'South Park' over here, but I really like what Matt Stone and Trey Parker do; they're very brave, particularly in the current American climate, which is a bit scary. I admire anybody who's prepared to actually cut through the bullsh-- and talk some sense in times like these." ■ MC

ence market trends or sort of sudden economic downturns, but I can have some influence over the quality, at least of the books that I'm doing.

So now I'm getting to the end of the run and we didn't save the world, we didn't do probably half the stuff that I intended the line to do, but then I intended the line to cure cancer, make the case for cold fusion and all the rest of it. So I probably had unrealistic expectations, which are actually the only kind to have. That said, I'm very, very pleased with what we've done. I'm not claiming that ABC had anything to do with the recovery of the comics industry. I'm sure there were a lot of other books that sold a lot more copies and probably dragged people into the shops more. But, I think that in general terms, we perhaps improved the quality just a little bit, and contributed in that way. So I'm pleased, and I'm certainly pleased with the vast number of really lovely comic books that we produced along the way. (W)

Looking for the comics and trade paperbacks Alan Moore discussed in this feature? Flip over to p. 167 in the Price Guide for a look at all these titles and a host of Moore's greatest works!

AS I RECALL, IT ALL STARTED AT CHRISTMAS LAST. MOONBEAM IN THE QUICK HOUSEHOLD.
SON, WHY DON'T YOU STOP PACING AND COME EAT THIS CHEMICALLY MODIFIED DUCK THAT YOUR MOTHER'S COOKED?
I CAN'T. I'M PREOCCUPIED.
PREOCCUPIED? TELL US IT'S DRUGS, SON. OR THAT YOU GOT SOMEBODY PREGNANT.
I'M AFRAID NOT, DAD.
I'M PREOCCUPIED WITH THE PHENOMENON OF LIGHT. THERE'S SOMETHING FISHY ABOUT IT.
SO PEACEFUL DAD, NOT AGAIN.

EASY AS A-B-C The other America's Best Comics characters stood no chance when Tom Strong (top) and Jack B. Quick teamed up for Trivial Pursuit.

DC DEALMAKER DAN DIDIO

Man th

DC's VP of Editorial engineered the headlines that landed the publisher back on the industry's front page | BY RICHARD HO

Look back at some of the biggest headlines of 2003 "*Batman: Hush* shatters sales records!" "Greg Rucka takes over *Wonder Woman*!" "*Teen Titans* relaunched by Geoff Johns!" "Jim Lee to pencil *Superman*!" "Grant Morrison, Jeph Loeb among host of top creators inked to exclusive contracts!"

See a pattern? Yep—they're all DC.

Not only that, the publisher's domination of the news began shortly after one headline that you may have missed:

"Dan DiDio handed DC's editorial reigns!"

In the ongoing battle between DC and Marvel for supremacy in sales, buzz and fan approval, arguably the biggest news of 2003 was DC monopolizing the industry buzz. Need proof? Just look at the unprecedented success of *Batman*, a book that held the No. 1 spot 10 out of 12 months, and broke the prized 250,000 sales mark.

"Dan DiDio's bringing the whole universe up," says DC exclusive scribe Johns, who currently pens *Flash*, *JSA*, *Hawkman* and *Teen Titans*. "There's a lot of energy around the DC offices these days, and it's a fun place to be."

For DiDio, it's not just about power, sales or contract negotiations. It's about taking a premiere company by the horns—in an industry that's been dominated in recent years by Spider-Man, Joe Quesada and the letter X—and wrangling it back into contention. And when DiDio took over editorial oversight of the DCU in February 2003, that's exactly what he did.

Batman was already a smash hit by the time he walked in the door—but the rest of the universe needed help. His primary strategy for wresting momentum away from Marvel? Lock up the hottest creators in the industry to exclusive contracts. While his much-heralded blockbuster signings can be credited to his proactive outlook and excellent recruiting skills, DiDio was able to seal many of his deals by promising the creative freedom to tell great stories—a promise creators have taken to heart.

"The biggest thing you can ask for as a creator is to be protected," insists Rucka, another of DiDio's exclusive signings. "You

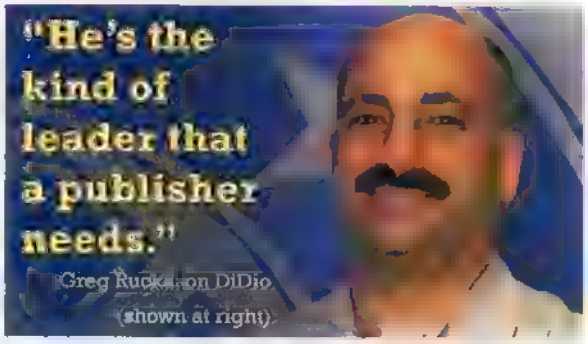
Best of the Year

want to know that you're going to be able to create your work, and that the work will not always be subject to the whims of corporate or marketing concerns. You want to believe that if the work is good, it will be financially successful. And that's what DiDio brings. He's the kind of leader that a publishing house needs. He's got courage, smarts, passion—pretty much everything that makes you say, 'I wanna do my work for you!'"

And the work has been successful indeed, with a constant stream of critically-acclaimed stories and chart-topping events proving that "Hush" was only the beginning.

To keep the *Batman* train chugging along, DiDio tapped Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso—the duo whose gritty work on Vertigo's *100 Bullets* was right up the Dark Knight's alley—to take over after the departure of Loeb and Lee. Next, DiDio turned his attention to revitalizing another DC icon: the Man of Steel. The VP greenlit Mark Waid's *Superman: Birthright* mini-series—which applied the highly-successful "Smallville" reboot formula to Superman's comic continuity—and got the ball rolling on the widespread creative changes on the Superman line, set to kick off in April 2004. And when Johns and Loeb came to DiDio with the idea of putting Michael Turner on an arc of *Superman/Batman*, DiDio naturally said, "Let's do it!"

It's that kind of attitude that's brought the excitement back not only to the icons, but to the entire DC canon. "When Batman and Superman shine, it makes everything else stand out," agrees Johns. From *Flash*, *Wonder Woman* and *Teen Titans* to *Outsiders*, *Losers* and *Arkham Asylum*, old favorites and new concepts alike have blossomed under DiDio's watch.



"He really has made an impact across the board," says Group Editor Bob Schreck, who cites *Green Arrow* as one book that's benefited from DiDio's influence. "It was already a non-Code book, but it's gotten a little more non-Code, a little more current in its language. Dan's always open to new ideas and allowing things to be more reflective of our times."

And the editors aren't the only ones who appreciate his ideas. "His boldest gambit was to pitch me the idea of doing a *Catwoman* mini-series," recalls Loeb of his exclusive contract negotiations with DiDio. "I usually like to dig my own graves, but Dan picked out a pretty lovely plot in the Gotham City cemetery."

"I welcome his input," adds Johns. "It helps me be a better writer. I love when he calls and says, 'Push this up on *Hawkman*.' I like being challenged. No matter what you're doing, you can still learn. When you stop learning, your scripts start to suck."

Of course, you'll never hear any of this from DiDio himself. The modest VP doesn't like to take credit for DC's amazing resurgence—especially with so many quality people going to bat for him every day. The Superman revamps started with DiDio issuing a challenge to his editors to push the character back to the top—but it was the editors who hand-picked the perfect creative teams to accomplish that task.

Still, there's no denying that in an industry of movers and shakers, DiDio moved and shook the most in 2003, greenlighting groundbreaking projects and pulling the trigger on the moves that eclipsed everything else happening in the world of comics.

"He doesn't know his limitations," explains Loeb. "So he's willing to believe in the impossible. When you work with superheroes, it's a very healthy thing to believe in. In any other business, I think they'd cart you away in a straight jacket."

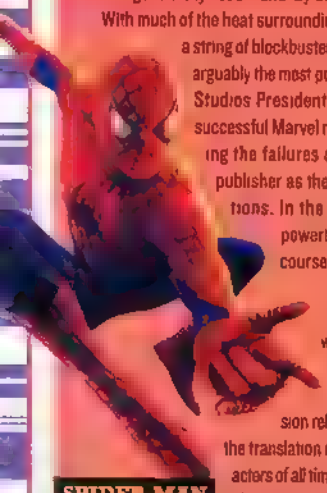
Call him crazy, or call him "the man." But *Wizard*'s going one better.

We're calling him "Man of the Year." ■

AGE OF WONDER The revamped *Teen Titans* book is just one of many projects spearheaded by DC Vice President of Editorial Dan Didio.

MAN TO WATCH IN 2004

AVI ARAD



SPIDER-MAN

Marvel's gone Hollywood—and, by doing so, Hollywood's gone Marvel!

With much of the heat surrounding the publisher in 2003 being generated by a string of blockbuster films including "Daredevil," "X2" and "Hulk," arguably the most powerful person in the House of Ideas is Marvel Studios President Avi Arad. The movie exec has driven the successful Marvel movie machine from the very beginning, erasing the failures of past Marvel films and establishing the publisher as the premiere home of comic book film adaptations. In the process, Arad has become a Hollywood powerbroker with a hand in determining the future course of Marvel Comics.

In the words of "X2" producer Tom DeSanto, "Like Wolverine, Avi is the best at what he does—both a friend to the filmmaker and a partner to the studio."

With the power of veto over every decision relating to any of the Marvel films, Arad oversees the translation of some of the most popular comic book characters of all time to the silver screen. For many moviegoers, the Marvel films constitute their first introduction to the world of comic books—and Arad doesn't take that responsibility lightly.

"If I had to use one word to describe Avi, it's passion," declares DeSanto. "The first meeting Bryan [Singer] and I officially had on 'X-Men' was with Fox and Avi, and Stan [Lee] and I could tell immediately that Avi got it, a rare thing in Hollywood. Someone who actually cares about the story and characters? Well, you can't ask for any more than that."

The familiar sight of Arad hobnobbing with stars like Tobey Maguire and Hugh Jackman on movie sets has become a staple of comic book culture. And of course there's no denying the influence of the Marvel movies on the books produced over the past few years. Many creators have implemented story and design elements with an eye towards previous and future film adaptations.

With "Spider-Man 2," "Punisher" and "Blade III" set to storm theaters in 2004, Marvel looks to continue its domination of the box office and reassert its strength in the comic book market. After all, Marvel's fate in one arena is tied to its success in the other—and Arad leads the charge for both. **RH**

Best Book

SURPRISE PARTY: Y: THE LAST MAN

Wonder 'Y' the world's last living male ranks first on our list? With more shocks than any other series, this book has it all. Even a monkey.

When it came to the Best Book of 2003, it was the last man who proved to be the frontrunner

Aside from his trusty helper monkey Ampersand, Yorick Brown is the sole male survivor of a mysterious epidemic that simultaneously wiped out every Y chromosome–carrying creature on Earth. *Y: The Last Man* co-creators Brian K. Vaughan (writer) and Pia Guerra (artist) have taken what could have been a million-dollar idea for an adult film franchise and turned it into a highly accessible and original DC/Vertigo series that delivers twisted plotlines full of surprises with every issue, solidifying it as the best book this year had to offer

Month after month, Vaughan and Guerra lured readers to the edge of a precipice with 21 pages of snappy dialogue and gorgeous art and then at page 22—BAM!—shoved 'em off and left them dangling for another 30 days, dying to find out what happens next.

"One of the great things of monthly comic books is cliffhangers, subplots; the idea of really wanting to read that next issue," explains *Flash* and *Teen Titans* scribe Geoff Johns. "*Y: The Last Man* takes a high concept, a clever and in-depth perspective and some solid, cliffhanger-filled storytelling, making it one of my favorite books out there."

Vaughan deftly concocts endings so shocking and suspenseful that his ability to leave readers hanging borders on malicious. Seeing Yorick get heaved out of a speeding train by two hobo women in issue #6 was a surprise, but seeing him land unconscious at the feet of a young woman who gasps, "Thank you Jesus!" left us to wrestle with a month of dirty speculation about what excitement the next issue held.

In issue #7, the lovely girl, Sonia, brings the reluctant hero to her utopian town of Marrisville, Ohio, where the women live in nice houses and even boast the rare amenity of electricity. However, their home-cooking and white-picket fences hide a dark secret as Vaughan and Guerra pushed their story into another unexpected contortion: The women are all escaped prisoners from a nearby penitentiary!

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Yorick, he's being stalked by his sister Hero, who's joined a militant femi-Nazi gang called The Amazons. The plot reached a crescendo in issue #9 with Hero staring down the barrel of a .45 clutched tightly in her brother's fist—another bit of the stunning plot acrobatics to further compel readers to grab seats for next month's trapeze act.

No sooner does one storyarc wrap then a subplot thread is cunningly ignited as the fuse for the next bombshell—Yorick may *not* be the last man alive! Issue #11 begins the "One Small Step" storyline that sends Yorick to the crash site for a Soviet space shuttle toting one woman and two testosterone-fueled males!

The cosmonaut twist would surely be enough to keep readers' heads spinning, but the co-creators kept on cranking. Why is a small cadre of Israeli soldiers searching for Yorick, and how do they know where to find him? Because a certain U.S. Congresswoman sent them—and she's Yorick's mother! In issue #15, we learn that the lone surviving female cosmonaut has been impregnated by one of her fellow space-travelers!

Vaughan rounds out a stellar year with "Comedy & Tragedy," the two-part story featuring guest-penciler Paul Chadwick (*Concrete*).

"'Comedy & Tragedy' is about an all-female group of performers called the Fish & Bicycle Traveling Theater Company," says Vaughan. "But what the hell do these ladies have to do with the last man on earth? A monkey with a knife wound may hold the answer..."

A monkey with a knife wound? With that tease, Vaughan and Guerra may already have a leg up on the competition for the Best Book of 2004! ■

SUPERMAN

Even Earth's yellow sun doesn't give the Man of Steel this much of a charge

The Dark Knight eclipsed Superman in 2003—even smacked him around a bit—during the "Hush" storyline in *Batman*, but the Last Son of Krypton isn't the type to take a beating like that laying down. When artist Jim Lee (*Batman*) and writer Brian Azzarello (*100 Bullets*) take over creative duties on *Superman* this April, Big Blue is going to get a hefty restorative kick in the tights and do some ass-kicking of his own.

The combination of Lee's hyper-realistic, energetic pencils and Azzarello's acute ear for dialogue and knack for putting characters through twisted plots full of unimaginable surprises is sure to take Superman to places even 65 years of continuity couldn't have prepared him for.

"Superman is going to be going more global," says Azzarello. "Jim and I are taking him out of Metropolis. He's not an isolationist."

The high-flying hero will tackle threats from around the globe, but the biggest threat will be coming from the last place (or person) you'd expect.

"We're going to be creating some new villains," teases Azzarello. "There is going to be one sort of B-level DCU villain that, at the end of our run, will be an A-level villain—capital A level." ■ **TC**

LUCK BE A LADY TONIGHT If Yorick Brown is indeed the last man on Earth, what need does he have for that chastity belt?

Best Artist

SUPERSTAR REBORN: JIM LEE

The recharged 'Batman' penciler proves for the second time in his 16-year career that he remains king of superstar artists | BY RICHARD HO

Comic book historians, take note—the superstar artist returned in 2003.

Yep, we're talking about Jim Lee, the fan-favorite penciler with unparalleled star power who made a triumphant return to the monthly grind on the smashingly successful *Batman*. And guess what? Historians aren't the only ones paying attention.

"The amazing thing about Jim is that after so many years away, he can come back into the mainstream and basically blow everyone away a second time," adds painter extraordinaire Alex Ross. "Jim's absolutely inspiring to me."

In an increasingly writer-dominated industry, where the success of a book can largely be determined by names like Brian Michael Bendis and Geoff Johns, Lee's return to monthly penciling rocked the status quo by dragging the spotlight back to the visual side of comics. Along the way, Lee also boosted comic sales to their highest levels in years, and hoisted the fate of one of comics' greatest icons on his shoulders.

"Jim has a style that's based on simple, strong figure drawing," points out Ross. "He had that over his contemporaries 12 years ago, and he has it today." Despite years spent running the business side of WildStorm, the evolution of Lee's polished style is apparent in the multitude of tricks that he's added to his deck of cards. "There were some new elements of a visual language that he developed with *Batman*," points out Ross. "The boldness of the style was something that frankly we hadn't seen in comics in quite a while. Just about all comics right now are boring compared to the way Jim was drawing *Batman*. And very few action oriented, superhero comics have the kind of in-your-face visuals that he was able to create."

Want more proof? Just take one look at the stunning black-and-white watercolor treatments for the flashback sequences of "Hush." "I had absolutely nothing to do with those sequences," insists Lee's longtime inker, Scott Williams. "The watercolor stuff was a chance for Jim to try a technique that was spontaneous, to create a different feel and a different ambiance, and he was able to use a technique that was all his."

While Lee's art has evolved since his early days on *Uncanny X-Men* 12 years ago, in many ways its effect hasn't changed. Fans continue to flock to his powerful poses, wall-smashing fight sequences and blazingly hot women. Perhaps most importantly, his knack for infusing iconic characters with energy and regality has gotten fans more juiced than they've ever been. From his dark and noble take on the Dark Knight Detective to his dead-on characterizations of Batman's rogues gallery, Lee has delivered a definitive vision on some of the most recognized characters in comics.

And his to-do list also evolves. After a four-month breather following *Batman*, Lee turns his attention back to the WildStorm Universe by penciling the first issue of February's weekly "Coup D'Etat" event where the Authority tries to take over the world (check out Lee's take on the team on our variant cover). And after tantalizing fans with his powerful rendition of Superman in *Batman* #612, Lee takes on the Man of Steel for a yearlong stint starting in April with writer Brian Azzarello, part of DC's across-the-board effort to reinvigorate its No. 1 icon. And if that's not enough, the busy artist has also confirmed plans to re-team with Loeb on another *Batman* story in the near future.

Sounds like someone making up for lost time. ■

BIG TIME As Lee silenced naysayers on *Batman* (right), he turns his attention to the Authority and Superman.

ARTIST TO WATCH IN 2004

DAVID FINCH

Only one person could keep Brian Michael Bendis from bolting *Ultimate X-Men* after his first six-issue stint—and for that alone, David Finch deserves recognition.

"The reason I stayed was because of David," raves the superstar scribe. "I was digging it so much, I said, 'I can't walk away [from this]!'"

As the artist who succeeded Adam Kubert on the popular mutant title, Finch has already won a massive fan following for his slick style and strong eye for detail. After filling in for a few issues (#27-28, #30), Finch won the regular penciling gig starting with issue #34, and quickly proved that he was the man for the job. "You know in the early '90s when there was a lot of billowing clouds so you didn't have to draw anatomy? No bullsh-- here," says Bendis. "He can draw anything."

Originally a student of Marc Silvestri on Top Cow's *Ascension* in 1997 and *Aphrodite IX* in 2000, the Canada native moved on to the House of Ideas with a stint on *The Call*, where he caught the eye of Ultimate editor Ralph Macchio. "He was a guy who was really on the cusp of developing into a truly top talent," says Macchio. "His draftsmanship has always been superb, and now his storytelling ability has grown by leaps and bounds.

"I already put him right up there with the very best in comics right now," declares Macchio.

Or, as Bendis puts it, "This guy is ready to explode." RH

Best Writer

ULTIMATE MAN: BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS

With clutch characterization and deftly designed dialogue, Bendis injects new levels of humanity into every book he writes | BY TODD CASEY

Anyone who can elevate Peter Parker's doting, septuagenarian Aunt May from a wheat cake-baking worrywart to a younger, self-assured magisterial matriarch of the household *deserves* high accolades.

Though some fans generally dislike her, writer Brian Michael Bendis took a risk and breathed new life into the much-maligned May by devoting an entire issue of the hit *Ultimate Spider-Man* (issue #45) to Peter Parker's only living relative sitting on a shrink's couch, hashing out her hatred of the Web-slinger. The result: as engaging a read as any throw-down with Venom. But Bendis did more than just make May interesting, he gave her as much heart as a living person, and it's Bendis' emphasis on raw humanity that has established a new writing template that all others follow for today's comic books.

BENDIS

"What Bendis does best is he can put himself inside anybody he wants without judgment," proclaims his *Ultimate X-Men* partner, artist David Finch. "The characters he writes are real people, with real human feelings. They're just so vivid."

From the penetrating adult-oriented drama of *Alias* to the all-ages superheroics of his Ultimate titles (*Ultimate Spider-Man, Ultimate X-Men, Ultimate Six* and *Ultimate Fantastic Four*), Bendis' variety of styles and sensibilities brim with realism.

Look at the examples, such as Killgrave the Purple Man. Bendis transformed this Z-grade villain into a twisted, Hannibal Lecter-level misogynist in *Alias*. And Daredevil has new layers of his persona peeled back by the inventive scribe. "You think you know me? You think you know who I am?" asks Daredevil after crushing Kingpin and usurping his empire in issue #50. "These are the new rules. This is how it will be from now on."

Even a familiar icon like Spider-Man gets the Bendis treatment; the wordsmith recalls his own teen angst when Spidey meets telepath Jean Grey in *Ultimate Spider-Man* #43 wherein the young hero struggles desperately not to picture the mind-reader naked after she mentions he was the first guy in months *not* to do it.

It's worth noting that Bendis' successful, character-driven, slow-burn five- and six-parters in *Ultimate Spider-Man* have set the tone of Marvel's entire line, evident in its made-for-trade-paperback arcs from *Incredible Hulk* to *Runaways*.

"His comics are so annoyingly good," praises *Runaways* and *Y: The Last Man* writer Brian K. Vaughan, "they make me want to kill myself four times a month."

With dialogue that pops and snaps more than a fresh bowl of Rice Krispies, Bendis paints a vivid picture of who his characters are. While many writers put a bit of themselves in their characters, Bendis doesn't seem to speak through his characters so much as they use him to channel their fears, worries and most intimate thoughts.

"[Bendis] has a rich amount of life experience that he funnels into his work," describes upcoming *Ultimate X-Men* co-writer David Mack. "He is very good at being sensitive to what is happening around him, appreciating the inherent beauty, drama and charm of life."

So, if the best writing comes from what you know, does that mean Bendis is a blind mutant lawyer with spider-powers? Maybe not. But it's clear he has some superhuman writing skills, especially if the man can make Aunt May come alive ■

WRITER TO WATCH IN 2004

BRIAN K. VAUGHAN

You can't keep a good Brian down.

Brian K. Vaughan soared to prominence in 2003, and is well on his way to joining fellow bald Brians from Cleveland, Brian Bendis and Brian Azzarello, as a "*Wizard* Best Writer."

"What's amazing to me about Brian is his inventiveness," applauds *Outsiders* writer Judd Winick. "He takes a concept and turns it on its head. He is easily one of the original storytellers in comics today."

In an impressive juggling act, the scribe simultaneously tosses around his high-concept tale of the death of all men on Earth save one (*Y: The Last Man*), his superpowered John Hughes flick (*Runaways*) and his high-powered espionage thriller (*Mystique*), all the while ensuring that each has imaginative plotlines, razor-sharp characterization and astonishing cliffhangers.

"There's nothing cooler than when someone takes chances and crafts a unique voice," praises *Ultimate Spider-Man* scribe Brian Michael Bendis. "What a pleasure it is to work in the same business with a writer like Brian."

In addition to his monthly titles and mini-series, Vaughan will be adding a four-issue arc of *Ultimate X-Men* to his plate for 2004 that's sure to surprise and amaze fans with his trademark mind-blowing storytelling contortions. TC

ULTIMATE BRIANS Vaughan's *Mystique* (left) takes cue from Bendis' work on *Ultimate Spider-Man* and others.

Best C

Here at *Wizard*, we love to make lists. So it's only logical that we'd put together one for the Best Covers of 2003. We locked ourselves in an office plastered with over 100 possible covers and whittled it down to the 10 you see here. Aside from the usual yelling and showboating, the staff stuck to a few basic rules. The covers had to grab the reader's attention, bring something original and inventive to the table and amp up the "wow" factor. Sound simple? Well, it ain't. So sit back and bask in the glory of the Best Covers of 2003.

THE WIZARD STAFF

Death and Mystique go way back. There is a relationship that few can quite understand, but Joseph Michael Linsner with his perfect facial expressions and surrealistic cover work, seems to have a handle on it. "[Mystique's] skull motif has been there since the very beginning," Linsner notes. "So having her embrace Death just made sense."

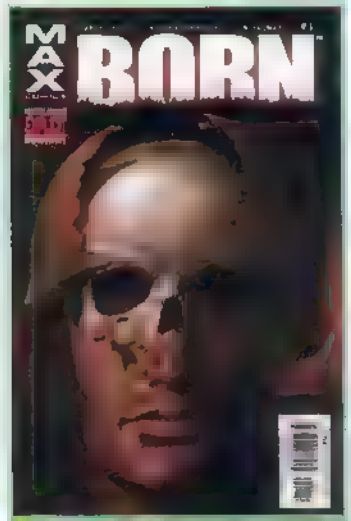
Kicking off the "Split Decisions" arc, this cover couldn't have handled the title more literally, with a rampaging Hulk ripping through the fourth wall to menace the reader. Which is just what artist Mike Deodato hoped for. "I wanted readers to feel the Hulk was a menace," Deodato explains. "So that anyone seeing it would want to look at the interior pages."

If you glean anything from this cover, it's that things are about to heat up for Marvel's First Family, and the menace behind it all is none other than Dr. Doom. "I don't get an opportunity to do much really dark stuff," Mike Wieringo says. "So I liked the opportunity to do something that was sort of scary and eerie."

Does Green Arrow ever miss his target? Not often. So, why would he aim at Green Lantern's ring? More importantly, what happens when that very sharp arrow hits the most powerful weapon in the DC Universe? Like a needle pointing at an eyeball, artist Matt Wagner creates a sense of tension that forces the reader to reach for the cover...and look inside!

The massive pool of blood under Wildcat's battered body, coupled with the reflection of the new Crimson Avenger, makes for a jarring visual. Taking a challenging idea and turning it into such a striking cover isn't easy, but artist Carlos Pacheco pulled it off. "I realized it would be cool to play with the placement of key elements on the cover."

Covers



Images have power. So says renowned Polish poster artist and *Born* #1 cover artist Wieslaw Walkuski. When introduced to the story in *Born*, it wasn't hard to tap into some of its themes. "War was my particular inspiration for the covers," Walkuski notes modestly. "I have never seen real war. The cover is only a symbol." But what a symbol.

There's a lot to be said for simplicity. With this cover, artist Clayton Crain shows just how small Hank Pym really is by standing the miniscule Avenger next to one of his own ants—which dwarfs him in size! With a stark white background, it's hard not to do a double take when looking at the image, even after you've seen it a million times.

Captain America in chains?! Say it ain't so! This cover reeks of symbolism, with the Star-Spangled Avenger shackled in a metal prison. This is Captain America like we've never seen him—helpless. John Cassaday's blank background expertly draws the reader's eye straight to the hero, giving them the impression that all Cap can do is stare out in fear.

Like rubberneckers slowing down to gawk at a pileup, it's impossible for anyone to look at artist John Watson's blood-soaked visual without wondering "What the heck happened to Hawkman?!" "I looked at a lot of fine art with dead or slumped figures in it," Watson says. "I thought it'd be cool to have the logo as blood to emphasize the injury."

Talk about creepy. Artist J.G. Jones takes the universal image of an astronaut and gives it a decidedly morbid twist, as readers are greeted by a leering human skull in the astronaut's helmet. This year's Best Cover not only shocks and awes, it goes the extra mile. Admit it, if you saw this anywhere else, as a movie poster or book cover, you wouldn't be able to turn away. And that's the whole point. "I wanted an image that distilled the story down to a single dramatic moment," Jones explains. "The readers know that something very bad has happened to at least one of the astronauts in the story, but it doesn't give away the ending."

Best of

BEST CLIFFHANGER

RETURN OF JASON TODD (BATMAN #617)

Jeph Loeb couldn't have done any better had he pushed us off the cliff himself. The *Batman* scribe had unloaded a steady stream of shocking moments throughout his acclaimed "Hush" storyline—from Batman's defeat in issue #608 to Bruce Wayne's childhood friend Tommy Elliot getting shot in #613 to the unveiling of Two-Face in #615. But none of them could compare to the bomb Loeb dropped on the final page of issue #617, when he brought back the Dark Knight's long-deceased sidekick—Jason Todd!

Okay, okay, so it was really Clayface in disguise. But that does nothing to take away from the shock value of the most audacious, jaw-dropping, nail-biting cliffhanger of the year: seeing the animated corpse of the second Robin holding a razor-sharp Batarang to current Robin Tim Drake's throat. After meeting his violent and bloody demise at the hands of a Joker-wielded crowbar in the classic *Batman* tale "A Death in the Family," Jason Todd had reached Bucky status in the pantheon of truly dead heroes—that is, heroes who stayed dead and never came back. Loeb himself once said in the pages of *Wizard* that the fallen Robin would never show up on *his* watch. And of all the gut-wrenching revelations unleashed by Loeb, this was the one that tore at Batman's soul the most.

"It's more about Batman's reaction to Jason's reveal than our own," explains *Ruse* scribe (and Batman fanatic) Scott Beatty. "In his world, there's a definite permanence to death. His parents died. Barbara Gordon was crippled. But when Jason comes back—a complete impossibility in Batman's world—you shudder with him at the utter improbability of it. Batman already lives with an all-consuming guilt over Jason's death. Having Jason come back from the dead and tell him so only confirms his greatest fear." ■ **RICHARD HO**

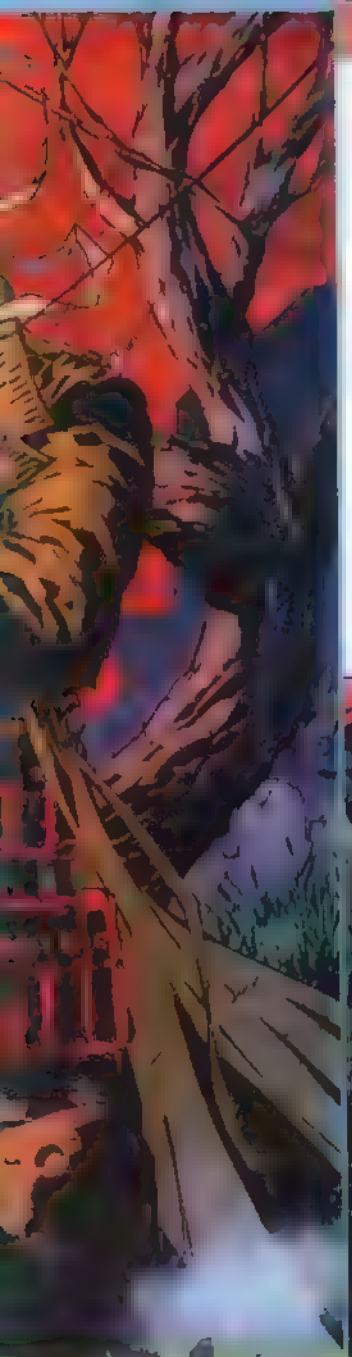
AND THIS TIME, YOU LOSE.
Jason Todd became Robin after Dick Grayson.
Hoping to harness the rage that had driven him throughout his life, I taught him how to fight.

BUFF BIRD This final page to *Batman* #617 was shocking for two reasons: Jason Todd's alive, and he's been using Stacker 2!

the Rest

BEST CHARACTER

DAREDEVIL



This year, the devil *definitely* received his due

Under the guidance of top-selling writer Brian Michael Bendis (*Ultimate X-Men*) and detailed by the realistic and gritty pencils of artist Alex Maleev, Daredevil soared to new heights not seen since Frank Miller's epic run on the title in the '80s.

"Bendis writes the *Daredevil* I want to read," says *Green Arrow* writer Judd Winick. "To call it inventive does it a disservice. He is simply telling an amazing tale that satisfies every checklist: spot on dialogue, dead-on characterization, unexpected plot twists; it's storytelling at its best."

After outing Daredevil's secret identity in 2002—named *Wizard*'s Best Moment of last year - Bendis and Maleev topped their own effort in early 2003 by putting Matt Murdock front and center as he had to defend his good name against the tabloids that outed him. But the most stirring and emotionally charged events of the year for Daredevil came in the last six months of Bendis and Maleev's run as arch-villains The Owl, Typhoid Mary, Bullseye and ultimately the Kingpin all returned in a deadly game of cat and mouse against the Man Without Fear.

Daredevil proved he was the character of the year by taking on his arch foes one by one and emerging on the other side a changed man—and possibly not as heroic as he once appeared. From his brutal, issue-long fight with Bullseye in *Daredevil* #49 (where he carved an actual target on the villain's forehead) to his final confrontation with the Kingpin in #50 (where he tosses the heavyweight out a window and onto the hood of a car before driving the Kingpin through the front of a bar), DD never pulled a punch and proved there's a new Kingpin of Manhattan...and his name is Daredevil. ■ **MIKE COTTON**

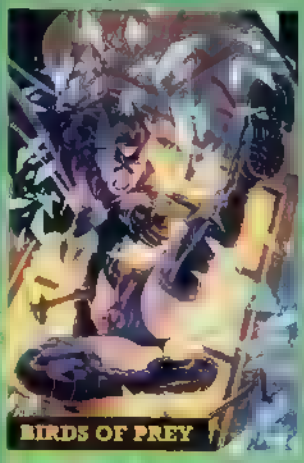
MURDOCK THE GREAT After taking lumps from virtually his entire rogues gallery, Daredevil finally rules Hell's Kitchen.

HONORABLE MENTION

Other cool comics stuff in 2003

"X2: X-Men United"

Drakon (who debuted in *Green Arrow* #25)



Birds of Prey #56 (thanks to the new creative team of writer Gail Simone and artists Ed Benes and Alex Lei!)

All of the Marvel characters that pop up in *1602*

Spider-Man (with raging hormones intact) thinking about Jean Grey naked in *Ultimate Spider-Man* #43

Dark Horse's *Judge Dredd vs. Aliens: Incubus* mini-series—loads of action and plenty of gore as the aliens invade Mega City One!

Dr. Strange (*Amazing Spider-Man* #57, #58, #500 and *Thor: Vikings* #2 and #3)

Staff Writer Mike Cotton and former staff writer Casey Seijas (*100 Bullets* #43)

Conan

The Darkness artist Dale Keown

An inept dog catcher struggles with what to do with the Joker's pet hyena in "DogCatcher," a backup tale that began in *Detective Comics* #786.

Baby Hyperion fries a yapping puppy in *Supreme Power* #1

The theme to the "Teen Titans" animated series

Mark going the equivalent of 19 rounds with Zoltar in Top Cow's *Battle of the Planets* #9

Black Panther knocking the Red Skull's jaw off in *Avengers* #70

Black Adam ripping out Kobra's blood-pumper in *JSA* #51

El Cazador #1 (take that, Johnny Depp!)

Alias #27 (Scott Lang, we hardly knew ye.)

Those Beak and Angel babies from *New X-Men* #141 **THE WIZARD STAFF**

BEST MOMENT

MAGNETO REVEALED (New X-Men #146)

Just like the force of nature he commands, Magneto would not be denied

In one of the best-kept secrets in comics, *New X-Men* writer Grant Morrison shocked fans with issue #146 when, after more than a yearlong absence, the scribe resurrected the X-Men's greatest foe in one shocking and polarizing issue.

In 2001, with his first *New X-Men* storyarc, Morrison killed Magneto when Genosha was destroyed in a devastating Sentinel attack. But even that death wasn't as shocking as how the writer, along with artist Phil Jimenez, brought the Master of Magnetism back into the X-universe.

In one astonishing issue, Morrison revealed that Magneto had been posing as Xorn, one of the X-Men and a teacher at Xavier's school, for over two years. The first to figure out Magneto's ruse, Charles Xavier receives the brunt of Magneto's wrath as he's crippled again when Magneto removes the metal implants that had been keeping the X-Men founder upright for months. Magneto was back...and more determined than ever

TOOT YOUR OWN XORN Not only is Magneto alive, but he successfully infiltrated the X-Men's ranks.

"To do this part of the genre well—the return of the big villain—is so very hard," says *Ultimate X-Men* writer Brian Michael Bendis, who knows a thing or two about how to keep big secrets. "[Morrison] did it perfectly and kept it a surprise. I know how hard that is, and he gets all my respect. I was very impressed by the showmanship of the entire issue."

Towering over a crippled Xavier, Magneto crushes all the hopes of Xavier's plans for peaceful co-existence

"X-Men emergency indeed, Charles," boasts the villain to his longtime nemesis. "The dream is over." But the moment will live in fans' minds forever ■ **MC**

BEST SINGLE ISSUE

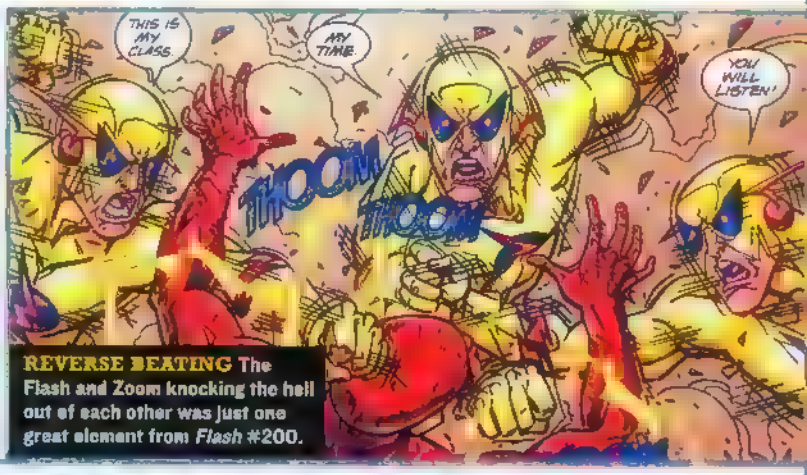
FLASH #200

When it came to the best single-issue story of 2003, *Flash* #200 sprinted away from the competition at light speed.

The penultimate chapter to writer Geoff Johns' "Blitz" storyline and the culmination of his three-year run (so far) on *Flash* perfectly encapsulated everything great about Johns' take on the Scarlet Speedster: Fans were treated to a great fight between two mortal enemies (Flash and Zoom, otherwise known as Hunter Zolomon, a former Flash ally), a heartbreaking personal revelation (Linda loses her twins to a miscarriage when she's attacked by Zoom); a great fanboy moment (when Hal Jordan, Barry Allen and Wally West meet at the end of the story to discuss the Flash legacy in what could be called the Best Reunion of 2003); and a mind-blowing cliffhanger that radically changes the entire scope of the book (we don't wanna give that away if you haven't been reading)!

"What Geoff did, redefining the Wally West character and taking back Flash's secret identity, is brilliantly subversive in this time of superheroes revealing their ids left and right," proclaims *Catwoman* writer Ed Brubaker. "Here's Geoff, taking it back instead. And the added tragedy that we can see hanging over Wally and Linda's lives for the future really does change things, and in mainstream comics, real change is hard to come by."

All of those great plot elements, combined with the high-energy, eye-popping artwork of emerging superstar Scott Kolins (his renderings of Flash and Zoom racing across the planet in an explosive tooth-and-nail brawl have got to be seen to be believed), made *Flash* #200 the one comic in 2003 that no comic reader—Flash fanboy or otherwise—should have passed by. ■ **ANDY SERWIN**



REVERSE BEATING The Flash and Zoom knocking the hell out of each other was just one great element from *Flash* #200.

BEST MINI-SERIES

BATGIRL: YEAR ONE

Everything you thought you knew about the original Batgirl is wrong.

She's not a campy sidekick, she's not a girl playing a man's game and she's *definitely* not a character to be scoffed at—especially after you read *Wizard*'s Best Mini-Series of 2003, DC Comics' *Batgirl: Year One*, by writers Chuck Dixon and Scotty Beatty with artists Marcos Martin and Alvaro Lopez.

This action-packed, fast-paced retro story adds riveting new depth to Batgirl's characterization and new layers to her origins and mythos.

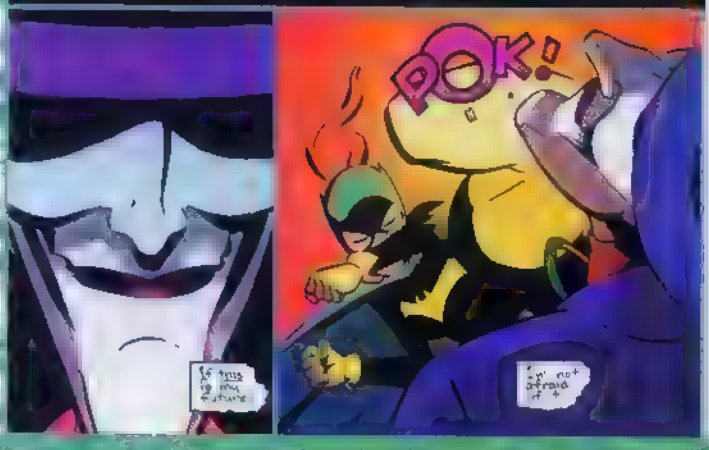
"It was a really great read, probably the surprise mini-series of the year for me," gushes Geoff Johns (*Teen Titans*). "Chuck and Scott did a great job of character interaction with Batgirl, Batman, Robin and the rest, and integrating the original Batgirl into the DCU with those appearances by the JSA's Wildcat, Dr. Fate and Black Canary. And Marcos' art just looked amazing!"

In *BG: YO*, Barbara Gordon languishes in the shadow of her famous father, super-cop and Bat-confidante James Gordon. Unable to make the Gotham City Police Dept. or the FBI, Barbara—a self-made martial arts expert, master computer hacker and a brilliant detective in her own right—embarks on a solo crimefighting career, a decision borne not of tragedy as with the rest of the Bat-Family, but out of her own fierce desire and burning determination.

It's that spin, along with many other ties to current DC continuity, that makes *BG: YO* such a fanboy delight. In a chilling scene that *Batman: The Killing Joke* fans will instantly recognize, the Joker makes a cameo appearance that's a portent of doom for Batgirl later in her career!

The capper? Any story that transforms Killer Moth and Firefly from laughingstocks to lethal A-listers has *got* to be the best mini-series of the year! ■ **AS**

FEETS OF STRENGTH Even as a rookie, Batgirl ain't afraid to lay some sweet chin music of the Joker. She'll probably pay for that a few years later.



BEST NEW CHARACTERS

ARKHAM INMATES

From the Joker to Hush, it took over 60 years for Batman to build up his legendary rogues gallery. But in just six months, writer Dan Slott and artist Ryan Sook created numerous ready-made classic rogues!

Instead of picking favorites between Jane Doe, Humpty Dumpty, the Shark or any of the other original inmates concocted in this bizarre mini, we had to include them all! Whether it was psychotic cult leader Death Rattle, the demonic graffiti artist Doodlebug or even the trash-rummaging Junkyard Dog, Slott and Sook crafted a cadre of crazies that ranks right up with Batman's most fearsome foes.

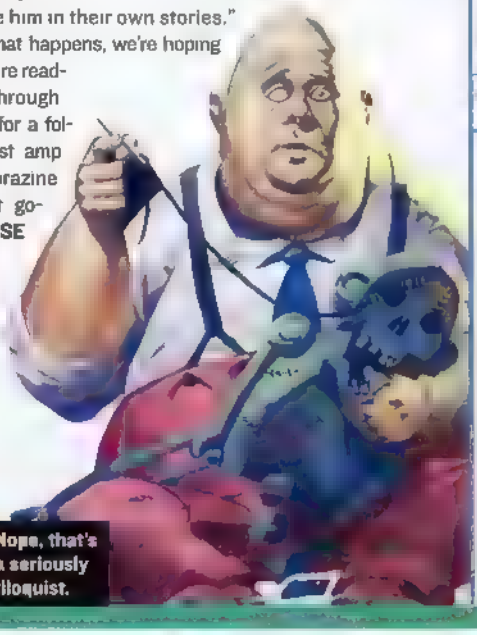
The DC mini-series kicked off with the introduction of Warren White, a gleefully heartless billionaire known in business circles as "the Great White Shark." After getting busted for corporate fraud, White cops an insanity plea and lands in Arkham. But as the fresh fish, White quickly learns that Arkham is no posh minimum-security prison.

If you thought the Joker was a freak, then Jane Doe would have to be mayor of Freaktown. A cipher with no personality of her own, Doe steals the skins of her victims and assumes their personalities and lifestyles! After getting captured, tortured and left for dead by Doe in Mr. Freeze's holding cell, White himself undergoes a grotesque transformation that makes his Shark nickname all the more appropriate.

Lastly, there's Humpty Dumpty, a seemingly harmless, obese inmate who obsesses over putting things together again. However, as his origin unfolds in issue #3, we learn that Humpty's fascination with repairing things led to him chopping up his own grandmother and sewing her back together again!

"I found Humpty Dumpty to be a brilliant creation," says *Birds of Prey* writer Gail Simone. "Great motivation, great behavior, great high concept. Watch as other writers scramble to use him in their own stories."

But before that happens, we're hoping Slott and Sook lure readers back through Arkham's gates for a follow-up visit. Just amp up your Thorazine before the next go-round! ■ **JESSE THOMPSON**



SEW CRAZY Nope, that's not Egghead or a seriously porked-up Ventriloquist.

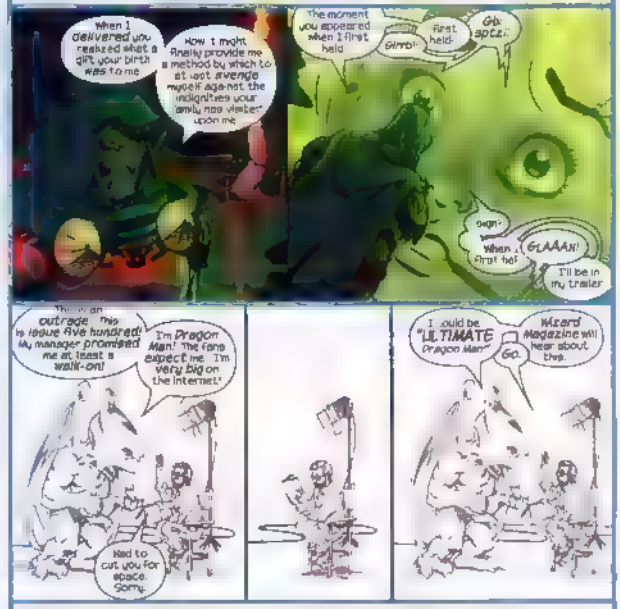
BEST EXTRAS

FANTASTIC FOUR #500 DIRECTOR'S CUT

If you thought your "Two Towers" DVD set had this year's best extras, then you haven't witnessed Marvel do the "Unthinkable."

Fantastic Four #500, the fourth part of writer Mark Waid and artist Mike Wieringo's "Unthinkable" storyarc, slammed fans with a mind-blowing clash between Dr. Doom and the Fantastic Four, but the excitement didn't end with Reed dropping Doom into Hell. With the special "Director's Cut" edition of the anniversary issue, readers were treated to enough fascinating behind-the-scenes features and bonus material to make "Behind the Music" jealous.

"The whole reason we did the Director's Cut was because this was *Fantastic Four* #500, the first 500th consecutive issue of a


When I delivered you realized what a gift your birth was to me.
How I might finally provide me a method by which to at last avenge myself against the indignities your family has visited upon me.
The moment you appeared when I first held
First held-
Gib aptz...
Grrrr!
Again!
When I first fell
GLAAAN!
I'll be in my trailer.

outrage this is issue five hundred! My manager promised me at least a walk-on!
I'm Dragon Man! The fans expect me. I'm very big on the internet!
Had to cut you for space. Sorry.
I could be "ULTIMATE Dragon Man"
GO.
Wizard Magazine will hear about this.

Marvel Universe comic," says *FF* Editor Tom Brevoort. "We wanted to do something special—and as we discussed it amongst ourselves, we hit upon the idea of creating a DVD extras-style section."

Fans were treated to an inside commentary from Waid and Wieringo about how they wrestled with plot, design and the intricacies of planning the climactic battle between the FF and their deadliest foe. Before-and-after panels, sketches and excerpts from early drafts of the script demonstrate how the creative process works from script to pencils, inks, letters and colors.

And what DVD would be complete without outtakes (above)? An outraged Dragon Man lambastes the director for not including him in the story, technical glitches send a flustered Doom to his trailer in a huff and demons threaten to drag Franklin into the dreaded pages of *Marville* in a hilarious strip created exclusively for the issue.

Stan Lee's original *FF* #1 script and a gallery of all 500 covers round out a comic so crammed full of extras, it's a wonder *FF* #500 isn't on sale at Best Buy! ■ **TODD CASEY**

GARTH ENNIS

As he preps the new adults-only 'Punisher' series, the writer fires away on Frank Castle going Hollywood and how superheroes depress him

WIZARD

ENNIS It's the way the book should have been all along. The freedom that you get from a mature-readers label, you don't have to constrain yourself. You don't have that slight feeling of unreality when you have a book populated with sociopaths, scum and mafia guys, and you're having to disguise how those guys would most obviously speak. Generally, it's a signal that the book's moving into darker, much more grim territory

I don't hate them. What I do hate is the way they dominate the industry. I think that is a damn shame. Unless we're careful, they'll kill the industry too, because sales are slipping and

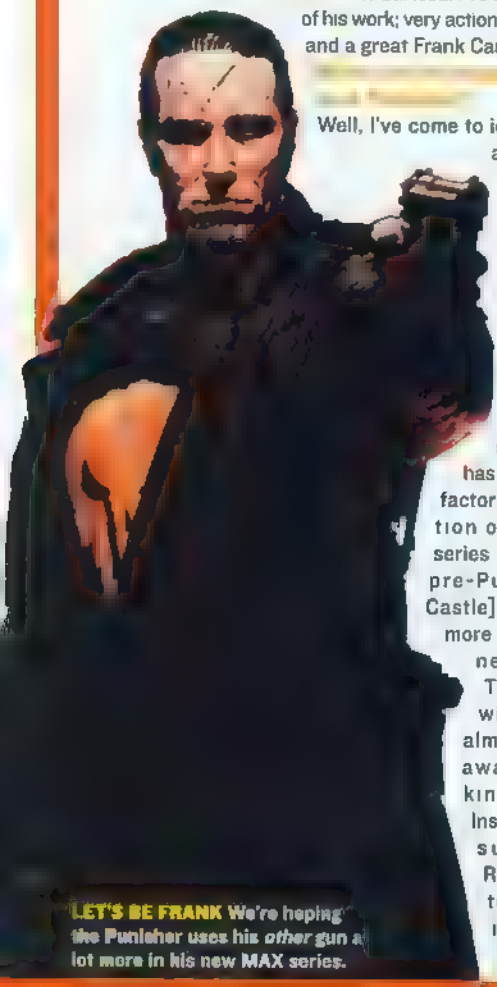
"I don't hate superheroes. I hate that they dominate the industry. It's a damn shame."

GARTH ENNIS

we don't seem to be able to find a way to break through to a mainstream audience. There's always gonna be something interesting to do with superheroes. Alan Moore proves that on a regular basis. But the way they've become so stagnant, the way that most people are happy to maintain the status quo—yeah, that depresses me.

No, he won't. Steve's doing issue #32 [of the current series], and then he's done. The first six issues [of the new series] will be done by a new artist named Lewis LaRosa. I've seen some of his work; very action-packed—and a great Frank Castle

Well, I've come to identify a kind of annoying, ironic, wink-to-the-reader kind of writing that I've been doing on the Punisher I've made it rather obvious, "This isn't real. You don't have to take this seriously." That has been the abiding factor with the exception of the Vietnam series *Born* [starring a pre-Punisher Frank Castle] which is much more in tune with the new MAX book. The new series will see a move almost completely away from that kind of writing. Instead of it being a super-violent Roadrunner cartoon, I'm more interested in keeping up the action



LET'S BE FRANK We're hoping the Punisher uses his *other* gun a lot more in his new MAX series.

I'd like them to keep it true to the Punisher, not to soften or sentimentalize him. If you do that, you have just one more guy who lost his family, goes on the rampage and we've seen that a thousand times. If they can keep it true to what Frank is all about—that detached, cold, unengaged killer that he is—then they'll have something that'll maybe make people stop and look twice. If they have some god-awful moment where he shows mercy or turns his back on killing towards the end of the film that's when you throw everything cool and interesting about Frank out the window.

Not much to add to what's already been in the *Vertigo Preview*. I have very high hopes for it, I think it's gonna be the best thing we've done to date, but we're a long way from seeing any material actually released

What stops me from doing any particular story is that I'm too damn busy with the ones I'm working on at the moment. It would be hard to pick out anything in particular. I would like to write screenplays, write for television. I was gonna say a novel, but actually, no I couldn't be bothered; it would be a hell of a lot of work. I'd like to get good g--damned rich, I'll tell you that! ■ **DAVE MARSHALL**

WIZARD EXCLUSIVE!

NEW X-MEN #151

Superstar artist Marc Silvestri returns to the X-fold for writer Grant Morrison's futuristic 'New X-Men' finale

BY MIKE COTTON

With his last *New X-Men* story, writer Grant Morrison plans to hit the Marc—Marc Silvestri that is. Morrison closes out his epic run on *New X-Men* with a four-part tale alongside Image founder and former *Uncanny X-Men* artist Marc Silvestri that gives fans a glimpse 150 years into the X-Men's future.

Much like Jim Lee's recent return to monthly comics with *Batman*, Morrison sees Silvestri's work—beginning with January's *New X-Men* #151—as a groundbreaking and kinetic explosion of creativity that will reintroduce fans to one of the hottest artists of the '90s.

"Marc's work has been an inspiration," says Morrison of his collaborator's detailed pencils. "His double-page spread of the new X-Men of the future is my favorite X-Men drawing ever. I keep asking him to draw wilder and wilder stuff and he just keeps coming back with these incredible pages. I think it's the most exciting work he's done in years."

The Scottish writer, whose *New X-Men* run ranks as arguably the most successful and acclaimed stint on an X-title since the legendary team of Chris Claremont and John Byrne, says his final arc will venture into a distant X-Men future where a crater stands in Manhattan's place, humanity's almost extinct and an explosion of weird new species has arisen to fill the evolutionary gap, making mutants only one of many bizarre and outlandish new life forms fighting for domination of the planet.

But just because the story takes place a century and a half after issue #150 doesn't mean there aren't some familiar faces for Silvestri to draw.

"Some of our old pals are still around, like Wolverine, Cassandra Nova and the Stepford Cuckoos," reveals Morrison. "Beak's grandson—Jerome Bohusk the second—has joined the team, and although he's a super badass, he lives in the shadow of his famous grandfather and is convinced Beak was the biggest, strongest, greatest hero there ever was. The main villain is the biblical 'Beast' of Revelations. Who he really is and what he's up to will be revealed. This final arc brings to the fore some deeply hidden plot threads from early issues of *New X-Men*, so everything gets tied together in this one."

Now exclusive to DC Comics, Morrison says he can look back on his *New X-Men* work with great pride, safe in the knowledge that he gave the X-franchise a much-needed jolt, moved stories along without breaking anything and left before he ran out of things to say. Of course, while he knows writers come and go, there is one relationship he brought to *New X-Men* he hopes will stick.

"I hope Scott and Emma stay together for awhile," admits the writer. "I'm very fond of them both and I really think they need each other. The Scott and Jean thing is so completely over, but Scott and Emma together could lead the X-Men to a new era of...newness!"

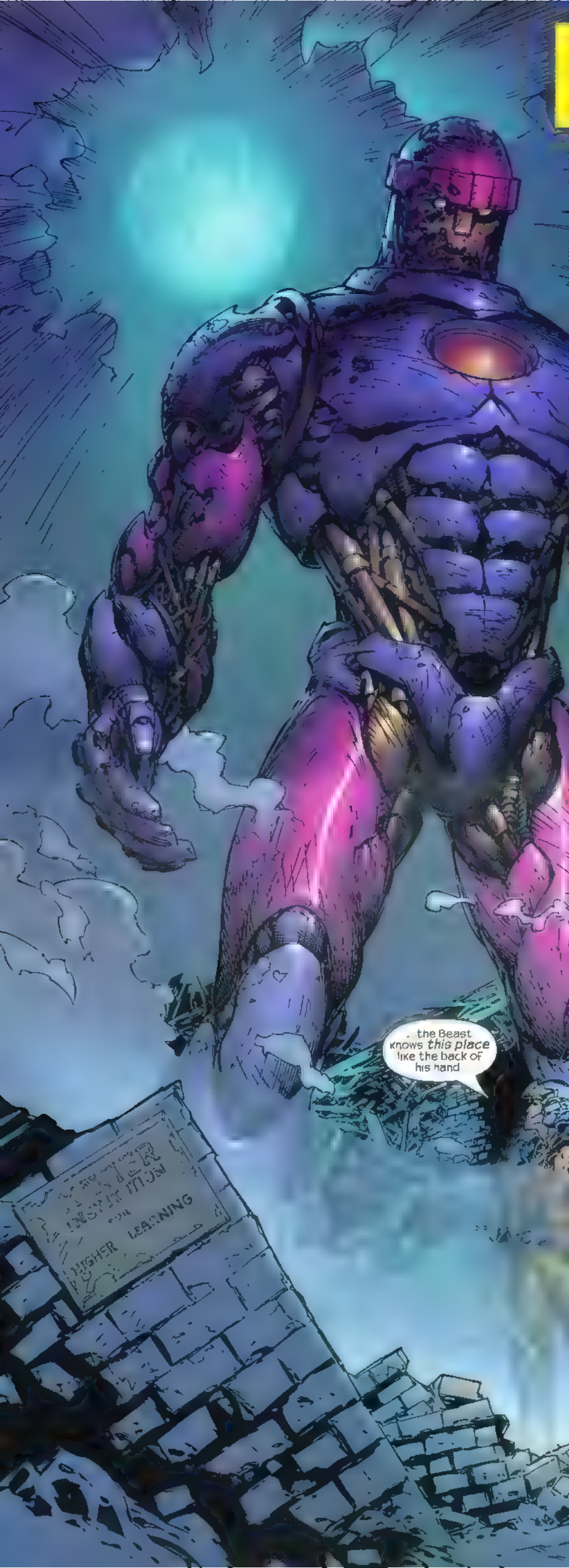
Ready for Morrison's final ride and Silvestri's return to the X-Universe? Then check out the next 22 pages, as *Wizard* previews their entire first issue!

BACK TO THE FUTURE Plenty of familiar faces pop up, including Wolverine, in Grant Morrison's final *New X-Men* arc set over 100 years from now.

THE HERE AND NOW
Sulphur...
..should have known.
Crawlers
Could be ten of em'
Might be only one...hard to tell, with the way they jump around
Rover, get down here!
Woo'

Boo!
Five
Awr ght. I s'pose you're all thinking, 'Let's just pick on the poor little human out on his own.' aren't you?
Well, you haven't met my big mate, then have you?
Rover, ntroduce yourself
DESTROY

DESTROY
DESTROY
Well, I reckon they probably figured out who *you* are, Rover, but I didn't catch any of *their* names
Wankers!
You know, could have sworn there was *five* of 'em.
This is bollox. We can't stay out here *one minute* longer


. the Beast knows this place like the back of his hand
INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER LEARNING

HERE COMES TOMORROW
PART 1 OF 4
GRANT MORRISON
WRITER
MARC SILVESTRI
ARTIST & COVER
BATT, JOE WEEMS, BILLYTAN
AND ERIC BASALOUA
INKS
VIRTUAL CALLIGRAPHY'S
STEVE FINCHOW
COLORS
RUE WOOTON
LETTERS
STEPHANIE INGRAM MIKE MANTS
EDITOR
JOE RUBINSTEIN BILL JEMAS
EDITOR IN CHIEF
PRESIDENT
SPECIAL THANKS TO
JIM MCLAUCHLIN & MATT HAWKINS

I'm late.
Sorry.
Five minutes ago I could have done with some help!
I ran into Apollyon the Destroyer or I'd have made the rendezvous in time.
You're sorry?
The servants of the Beast get closer all the time.
Welcome to Megamerica.
I'm E.V.A.
I'm from the Institute.

You must be Tom Skylark.
I don't use my own name, mostly. The pair of us work as a team.
"Rover and I."
I'm very good with machines, if I may say so myself.
"Rover" seems to be a first generation Sentinel...one of my remote ancestors.
Oh, such a strong machine.
I'm a Generation N unit from The World.
As an external artificial nervous system, I was bonded to the man Fantomex once, but...that was... long ago. Before what happened to him...
...now I am alone.
Sorry to hear it, love
Rover here might be an antique, but they built their killer robots to last in the old days.
Rover! Say hello to E.V.A.!
DESTROY
Vocabulary's not much to write home about, but he means well.
And he's saved my life more times than I can add up.

Tom, that thing on its back...the energy signature is so symmetrical...so profound.
Is it really
Well, what d'you think?
The Proud People found it on the moon
If it wasn't real, d'you think the Beast'd be so eager to get a hold of it? We've been chased the whole bloody way across the Atlantic!
Two more miles of irradiated ocean and we'll reach the edge of the Manhattan crater.
Two more miles of salt in your joints, Rover.
What d'you reckon to that, mate?
DESTROY

THE MANHATTAN CRATER
The Institute...
. We're trying to preserve the achievements of the past before they're all used up as fuel or compost in the race to dominate the biosphere
We figured an interspecies group of X-Men might be the only way forward in a conflict like this one.
The Xavier Creed has always stressed integration
Never mind integration the Proud People all died because of that bloody egg
I want payback.
If your X-Men think they can take down the Beast, then you can sign us up.

God has abandoned his failed experiment, the Earth
Now is the time of blasphemous creation
Where man once walked, new monstrosities thrive - his ruined cities, their breeding grounds
Mankind nears final extinction. The mutants are but one of many species fighting for survival in this new world
All, great and small, rich and poor, will fall to my dominion.
And receive their maker's mark...
My mark.

I will code such traits into you!
I will give you wings and eyes that burn and voices which can shatter stone and bone and flesh.
Open your eyes, my armies
Prepare to die in this Apocalypse!

THE INSTITUTE
The attacks come more frequently now... the Beast is pumping crawler chimerae out of his bio-foundries as fast as he can dream them up.
And he has the entire stolen mutant genebase to code and splice from.
Great. And the good news is?
He can't find us here, right?
You have security shields.
I saw you opening them to let us in.

So when do I get to meet the New X-Men and-
SKWUWWWRRK
DESTROY?
A crawler hitched a ride!
But I thought they couldn't teleport through your shield.
No. There was only one, but
...it's duplicating itself!

Scanning DNA. "Cyclops" traits and...
..."Multiple Man" codes!
Within minutes there could be hundreds!
Rover. Protect!
Feur!
?
DESTROY!

Each new duplicate increases its teleportation capacity!
Don't let them near the egg!
X
Men
Emergency!
Ah.
Beak!
WOO HOOO!

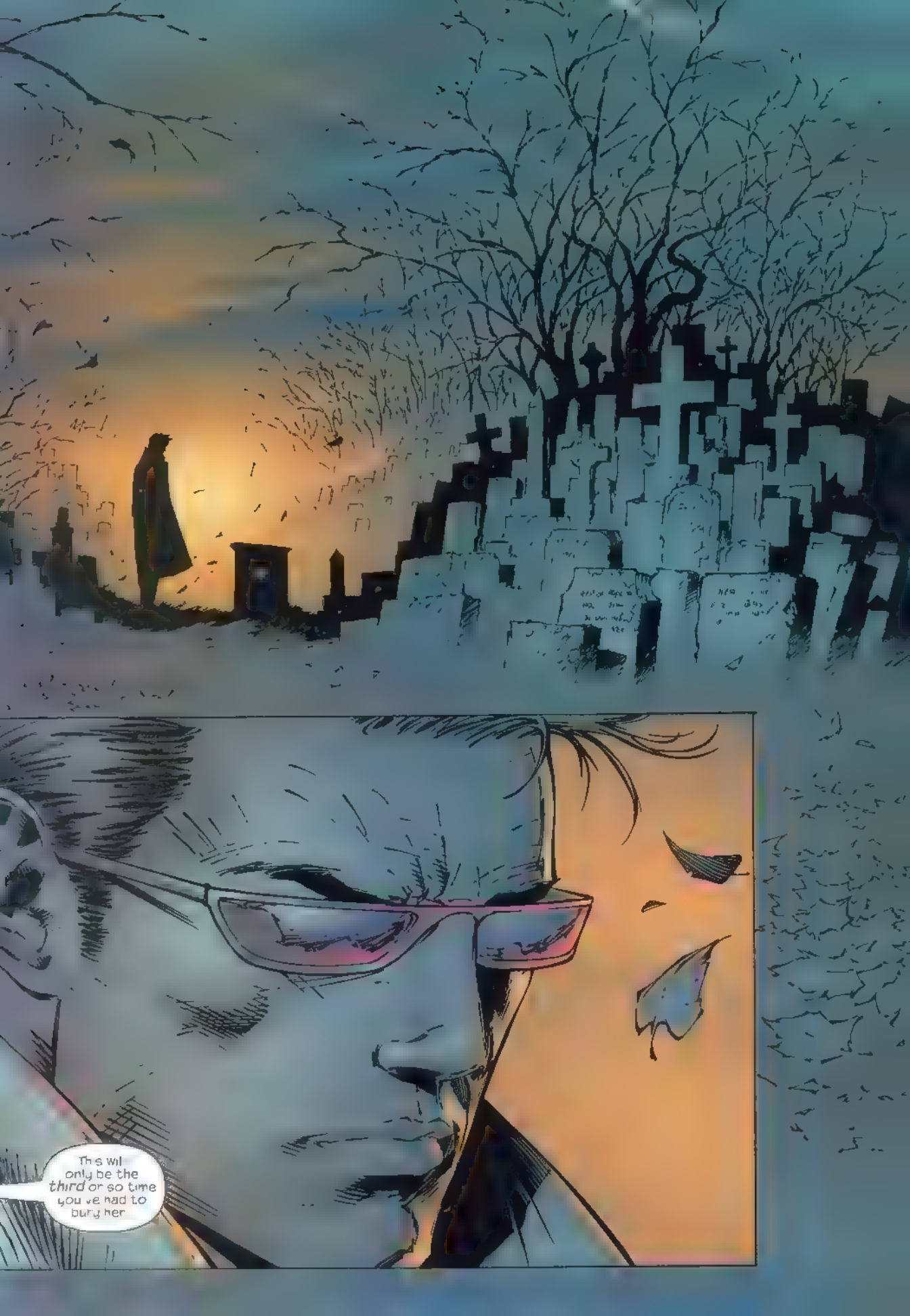
AAOW!
Charm on, monster!
DUH-DUHS
DDESTROY
DES
TROY
Schnell!
Mach Schnell!
Aus!
Aus!
The egg!
NO!
Rover?

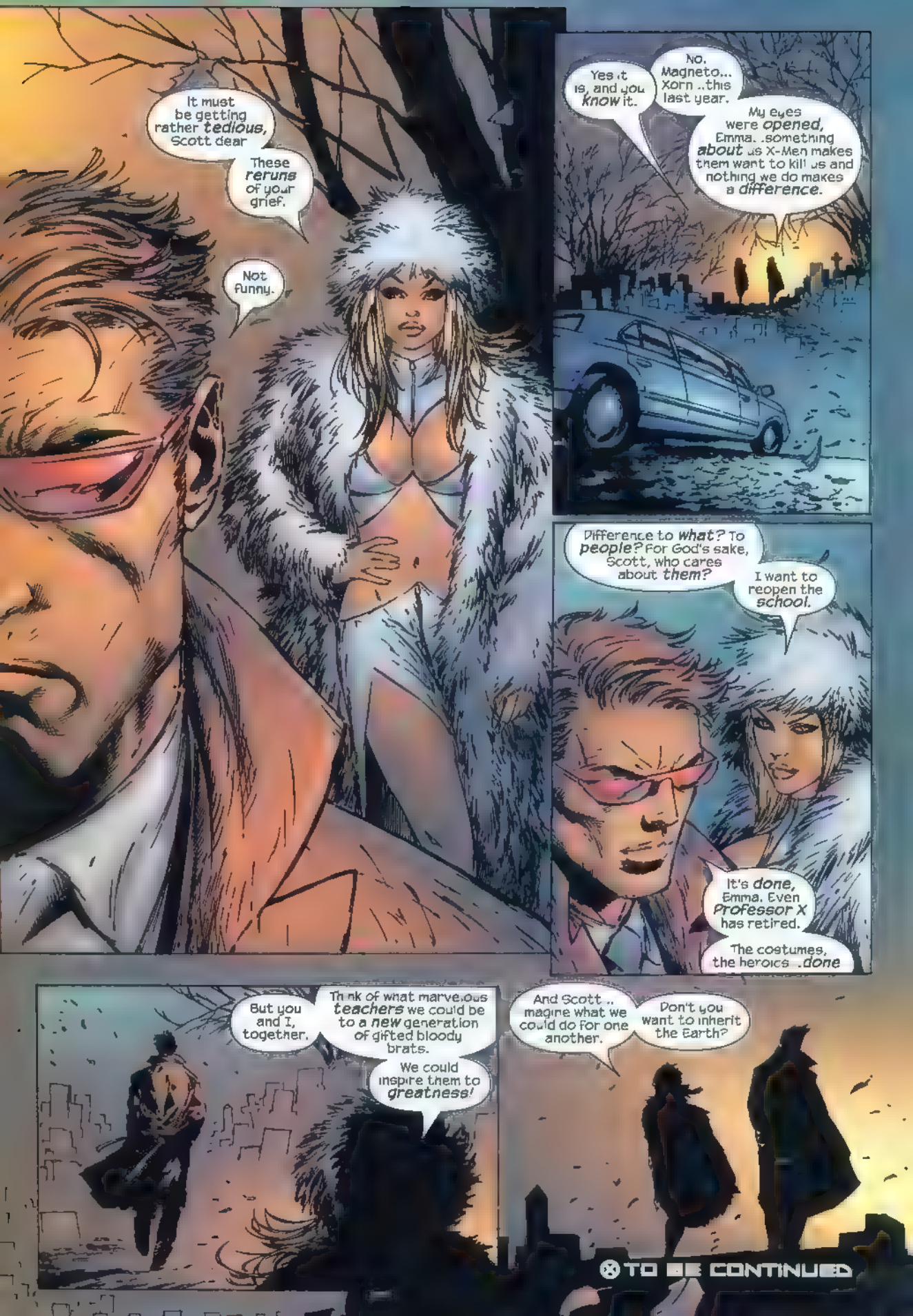
Are clever, Ja?
Ist gut?
All that you *are*, I *made* you to be
Auwwrr.. greater than go d
More deadly than *bombs*.
My Phoenix egg.
My sweet *Jean*.

Your arrival may have come too late, wayfarer.
Our last hope was taken from us...
...that immense power, that dread potential now lies in the hands of the Beast.
We are the three-in-one.
In our dreams we have seen a new Dark Age.
Seen all history set back a thousand years by ignorance and war
Seen, worse than all these, a terrible flaw at the heart of things.
How did this happen so quickly?
I guess no one thought Rome could fall, either...
...those guys had a postal service that could deliver mail across 170 miles in one day.
They had indoor plumbing, the women were free, they had art and science and a communications network that spanned the civilized world.

Within a hundred years, it was all debris and lice.
Sometimes ya gotta take care of what you got.
Any more joy to share?
Not much... I've spent the last three months in silence, observing b rd and insect behavior, cloud patterns, tides..
.somewhere, somehow, something has gone fundamentally wrong, Logan.
Well. If it a n't Bad News Cassie.
Nice ta see ya looking so perky, Miss.s X.
A little respect for our Headmistress, Logan. Please!
This is Cassandra Nova Xavier...
"Respect"? Ha
Our universe is broken, Logan. We have no dea where the break occurred .
...all we know is there's no one left to put it right. Except for us...

150 YEARS EARLIER...
JEAN GREY- SUMMERS
SHE WILL RISE
AGAIN

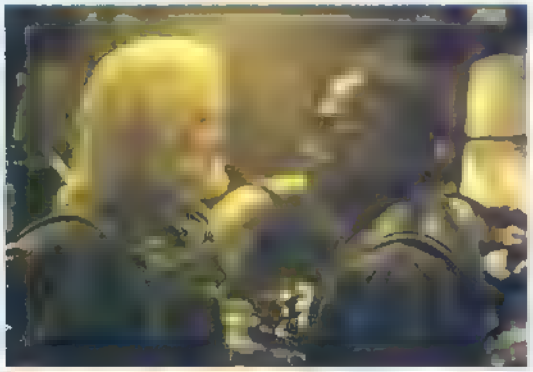

This will only be the third or so time you've had to bury her.


It must be getting rather tedious, Scott dear
These reruns of your grief.
Not funny.
Yes it is, and you know it.
No, Magneto... Xorn ..this last year.
My eyes were opened, Emma. .something about us X-Men makes them want to kill us and nothing we do makes a difference.
Difference to what? To people? For God's sake, Scott, who cares about them?
I want to reopen the school.
It's done, Emma. Even Professor X has retired.
The costumes, the heroics ..done
But you and I, together.
Think of what marvelous teachers we could be to a new generation of gifted bloody brats.
We could inspire them to greatness!
And Scott .. imagine what we could do for one another.
Don't you want to inherit the Earth?
TO BE CONTINUED

THE FINAL CUT

'Blade: Trinity' director/screenwriter David Goyer stakes out the final chapter of the Marvel Studios franchise

SNIPER HUNT In 'Blade: Trinity,' Blade (Wesley Snipes) will find himself at odds with human authorities.



David Goyer always wanted to take a bite out of a big-budget film—now the newbie director's got his chance. After writing the first two "Blade" films (as well as the in-production "Batman"), Goyer's pulling double duty with "Blade: Trinity" as writer and director of the final installment of the "Blade" trilogy of films starring action hero Wesley Snipes ("New Jack City") as the title character.

"I never had any inclination to direct a Blade film," admits Goyer, whose only previous directing gig was 2002's "Zigzag." "I was developing a number of mid-range projects as a director. But then one of the ['Blade'] producers, Lynn Harris, suggested I direct ['Blade: Trinity.'] I had just started the script and I told her I would have to see how it turned out before I said yes or no. After I finished it, I was really pleased—and I thought, 'Hell yes, I'm gonna direct this!'"

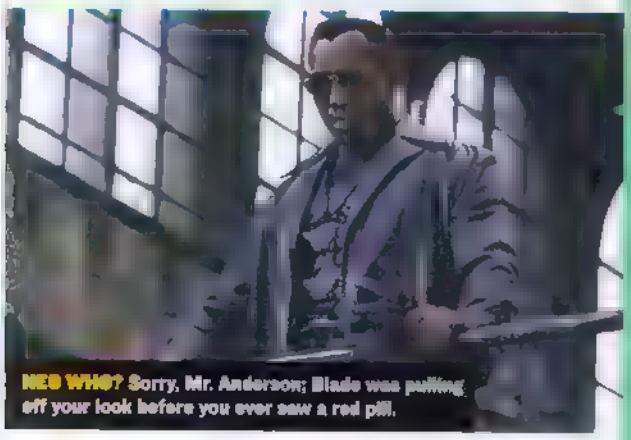
While excited about finally being the arbiter of his vision of Blade, the director was a little worried about directing the third act of the films, which have seen both Stephen Norrington ("LXG") and Guillermo del Toro ("Hellboy") at the helm (for "Blade" and "Blade II," respectively).

"I wasn't really hesitant—I just wanted to make sure that this was going to be the best script," Goyer says. "And I wanted to make sure that New Line [the studio that's distributing 'Trinity'] would commit enough money to the budget. Fortunately, the budget for this film is significantly higher than the last two, which gave me confidence that we'd have the tools to actually film all the insanity that I wrote."

According to Goyer, "Trinity," set for release on August 13, 2004, will be his final statement on the character that, before X-Men, Spider-Man or the Hulk, made a huge impact on the big screen starting in 1998 and revitalized the comic book movie genre. Following up on his previous screenplays, which introduced Blade as a half-vampire/half-human hybrid known as the Daywalker who hunts down vampires while sustaining himself on a chemical formula that keeps his bloodlust at bay, this film will see all-out war between the vampire clans and Blade's loose band of warriors.

"This will probably be the last 'Blade' film," reveals Goyer. "We're definitely building towards a definitive ending for the series. Given that this was the third film, I felt we had to shake things up.

"In the first movie, Whistler [Kris Kristofferson] talks about the war between the humans and the vampires—how it sometimes spills over into the real world—and I was interested in



NEO WHO? Sorry, Mr. Anderson; Blade was pulling off your look before you ever saw a red pill.

depicting that," continues Goyer, "the collision between Blade's world and the world that we, the audience, live in. What would happen, for instance, if Blade were actually captured by the authorities? How would they respond to his belief in vampires?"

While most of the secrets of the third film are being kept under tighter wraps than Bennifer's relationship status, the production team has announced that Kristofferson ("Planet of the Apes") will return as Whistler, Blade's confidant and vampire-hunting father figure. Jessica Biel ("7th Heaven") joins the cast in the role of Whistler's prodigal daughter, Abigail, who's a member of a vampire-hunting team loosely based on the Marvel Comics characters the Nightstalkers. "Van Wilder" star Ryan Reynolds will play vamp-hatah Hannibal King.

"This will probably be the last 'Blade' film. We had to shake things up."

WRITER/DIRECTOR GOYER

"In this film, Blade teams up with a younger group of vampire hunters, the Nightstalkers," says Goyer. "[Hannibal] King is one of the leaders. He was bitten by a vampire, spent five years as one of them, and was recently freed by another hunter, Abigail. King functions as a counter-part to Blade. His methods and attitude are entirely different."

In addition to Biel and Reynolds, the cast has swelled to include Dominic Purcell ("John Doe"), Parker Posey ("A Mighty Wind") and WWE star Triple H, all playing vampire heavies!

Only a few weeks into shooting in Vancouver at press time with miles to go before a final wrap, Goyer says he's still upbeat and intent on making the third "Blade" film an instant classic with fans.

"The most challenging thing is keeping up the momentum," says the writer/director. "You are constantly trying to communicate your vision to hundreds of people, trying to keep things moving in a timely manner without having to compromise. If your energy slips, so does the crew's. They take their cues from you. The weather in Vancouver is also a beast! It's been a huge challenge, trying to coordinate everything. And in fact, it's probably been the most challenging thing I've tackled so far. But I'm absolutely loving it." ■ **MIKE COTTON**

TRAILERS...

ALIEN VS. PREDATOR Lance Henriksen (who played Bishop in the "Alien" films) has been cast as a billionaire industrialist who gets caught between the two feuding alien races, and Sanaa Lathan ("Out of Time") has signed on for the lead Ripley-like role. Paul W.S. Anderson ("Resident Evil") directs.

FANTASTIC FOUR "[Writer] Mark Frost has turned in a draft for 'Fantastic Four' and now he's working on some minor revisions," said Marvel Studios Vice President Kevin Feige. "We're still working towards the December 2004 release date since we haven't heard anything different yet. Mark's working on his polish with an eye towards getting a director."

GHOST RIDER According to Feige, "[Writer/director] Mark Steven Johnson is held up in a beach house right now, working on a rewrite of 'Ghost Rider' and we should get a sneak peak soon. Hopefully aiming for a spring start depending on scheduling."

GLOBAL FREQUENCY "Survivor" Executive Producer Mark Burnett and writer-producer John Rogers have reportedly received a script commitment from the WB for a drama based on the DC/WildStorm comic about a global intelligence defense organization.

HULK 2 "We're actively developing 'Hulk 2' and we're meeting with top-tier, high-level writers and hope to have a writer in a number of weeks," said Feige. "It is set up at Universal again. We talk to Universal almost on a daily basis about 'Hulk 2.' Hulk is a great franchise with a lot of life left in it."

MAN THING Rumored plot leaks point to a ruthless oil baron who awakens a mystical spirit of a swamp after constructing oil wells on a sacred Indian burial ground. Check out the first official movie poster (right) from Artisan Entertainment!

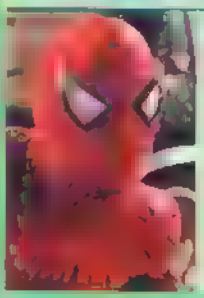
THE PRO The crude but fan-favorite image one-shot is rumored to be in development at MTV with creators Garth Ennis, Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti all involved in the process.

SUPERMAN The latest entry to the long list of rumored "Superman" lead actor candidates is Scott Speedman, seen most recently as the lead werewolf in "Underworld."

Y: THE LAST MAN Screenwriter Jeff Vintar ("I, Robot") has been hired to pen a draft of the script based on the Brian K. Vaughan/Pia Guerra Vertigo comic. ■ **THE WIZARD STAFF**

TRAILER OF THE MONTH

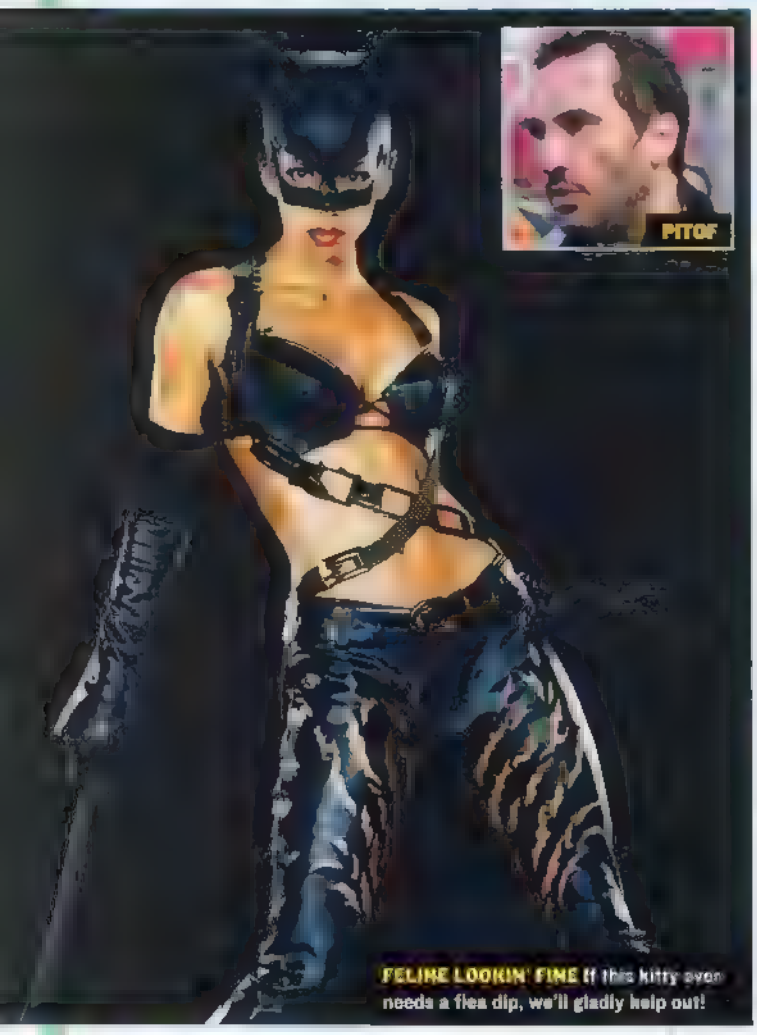
SPIDER-MAN 2



Doc Ock and Harry Osborn...working together? That's what the latest rumors are indicating, as Ock and Harry will bond over their mutual hatred of Spidey. Near the end of the film, Harry will supposedly discover his father's Green Goblin lair, setting up "Spidey 3"...which Sam Raimi may already be attached to, according to the latest reports. Look for "Spidey 2" to get a possible IMAX release as well.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Parisian director Pitof purrs about Halle Berry, showing skin and his vision for 'Catwoman'



FELINE LOOKIN' FINE If this kitty ever needs a flea dip, we'll gladly help out!

WIZARD. Were you familiar with Catwoman comics or from director Tim Burton's "Batman Returns"?

PITOF: Actually, both. When I was a kid, like most other kids my age, I was a big fan of superheroes like Superman and Batman, and Catwoman is part of that world. And of course I saw the first two Batman movies, and I was blown away by Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman. And when I saw "Batman Returns," I never thought that one day I would be directing my own Catwoman film! [*Laughs*]

Have you been reading a lot of old comics for research?

No, not really. I checked out some to see how Catwoman is treated in the comics, to make sure that our Catwoman was in the same vein. But I didn't want to be too influenced by the comic book, because the whole point of the movie is to be first a movie, and to be different. Different from "Batman," different from "Spider-Man"—this movie has its own identity. I tried to find my sources more in the character of Catwoman herself. To me, the Catwoman we're filming now with Halle Berry is in the continuity of the others. She's different than Michelle Pfeiffer's character, different from anybody who's played Catwoman in the past. But she is Catwoman. When you look at the differences between the comic book Catwoman and the TV or movie Catwoman, they're all different—but there's a feeling that they are all Catwoman. Halle brings her own personality, through her attitude and through the outfit.

You mentioned that this is in the same continuity as the other Catwomen. Does this mean that the film takes place in Gotham City? Will Batman make a cameo?

No, what I mean by continuity is the continuity of the *character* of Catwoman—who she is and how she acts. Her personality. But in terms of the world, no, it's a different world. There's no link with Gotham City. [The film's set in] a new city, and there's no link with any other superheroes. No Batman, no Superman—it's just Catwoman.

What do you think of the costume?

Oh, it's great! I'm really proud of the design of the costume. To me, it's in the same vein of the others, but it's unique to Halle. And it's very sexy. We tried to show a lot of skin, to make the suit as catlike as possible, and also to bring the dimension of a warrior—somebody who's ready for a fight.

Will the tone of the movie be dark, with a lot of action?

The tone is not really dark. Of course, we'll have a lot of night shooting, because Catwoman is a night character. But we try to bring some humor in the situations. We have a nice romance between Catwoman and Tom Lone [played by Benjamin Bratt]. So it will be action-packed and fun.

This is your first directing gig for an American film. Do you feel any pressure?

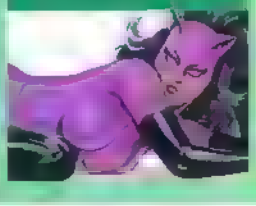
Pressure? What's pressure? [*Laughs*] Yeah, of course. I was lucky to have my first experience on "Alien Resurrection." I was the visual effects supervisor and the second unit director as well. So I was ready, but I definitely felt the pressure, especially during the first week. But you have to live with that, because on any movie, the pressure is everywhere. You're like a lemon, and everybody wants to squeeze you.

Any pressure from having to meet the expectations of so many fans?

Of course. But the really tricky part about adapting a comic book movie is that it's not a comic book, it's a movie. My goal is not to try to work with the universe of the comic book, but to work with the character. To keep the continuity of the Catwoman character herself—her behavior, who she is—more than the world.

■ **RICHARD HO**

DIDJA KNOW?



KILLING TIME

With filming wrapped, new images emerge from the set of 'The Punisher'

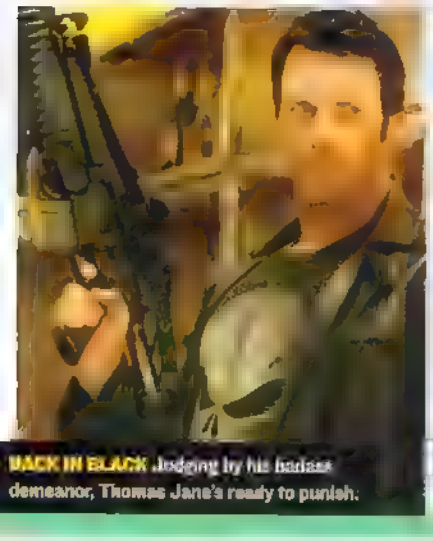
Watch out, Hollywood—Frank Castle's in town. Filming for 2004's "Punisher" film wrapped in Tampa, Fla., in early October, and writer/director Jonathan Hensleigh has begun the long and arduous editing process in Los Angeles to prep for the film's April 16 release date.

But to tide Frank's fanboys over, Artisan Entertainment and Marvel Studios have released these shots of star Thomas Jane in full Punisher mode, including the all-new movie poster. Just from looking at Jane as Castle preparing to fire that compound bow, there's little doubt that he's fully embodied the streetwise vigilante, as indicated by the arsenal he gets to employ in the film.

"I have a couple of sawed-off shotguns," says Jane. "I have a machine pistol with an extender arm. A bunch of claymore mines, an M4 with a grenade launcher. This [film] is 'Year One,' so what Frank has in this he cannibalized or he had himself saved in his army locker box from when he was serving as an army ranger."

Jane will also be seen using twin 45-caliber pistols, guns that in the film belonged to career military man Frank Castle Sr., played by Roy Scheider.

■ JESSE THOMPSON



BACK IN BLACK Judging by his badass demeanor, Thomas Jane's ready to punish.

'WHOA'-BLAZER

WIZARD goes to hell and back to snag images from the set of 'Constantine'

Warner Bros. blazes yet another trail to the silver screen with "Constantine," the adaptation of the DC/Vertigo classic *Hellblazer*. Keanu Reeves stars as John Constantine, the lung cancer-stricken occult mage who teams up with policewoman Angela Dodson (played by Rachel Weisz) to investigate the suicide of her twin sister—and gets mixed up with demons and rogue angels in a supernatural war in the process. The film is currently filming in Los Angeles and set for a Sept. 17, 2004 release.

Can't wait that long for a taste of hell? Sate your appetite with these pics! Mmmm... sacrilicious! ■ **RH**

SEE YOU IN HELL. Apparently, the Truth campaign had no effect on Keanu Reeves.

Q&A: NEIL PATRICK HARRIS

The voice of MTV's 'Spider-Man' speaks on why Parker rules and Doogie drools

HARRIS

WIZARD: How did you land the "Spider-Man" animated gig?

HARRIS: I just auditioned for it. I know the guy who did the voice casting for it. I went in, saw the drawings that they had for the characters, thought that the animation was pretty impressive, and put myself on tape for them, got a call back and ended up landing the job.

Are you happy with how well the show's done so far?

I'm real happy, yeah! You do the voices so prematurely to when the show comes out that it's nice to see that the quality is as high as it is, and the response is good. People are really particular over their Spider-Man [*Laughs*]; they don't want you to screw with it too much, but so far, the response has been pretty good.

Are you a huge comic book fan?

When I was growing up, I mainly read my brother's comics, and he was more into the X-Men. But yeah, I read a lot of his hand-me-down comics, and now I'm into anything Alex Ross does; *Kingdom Come*, books like that.

Did you do any "research" to prepare for the role (i.e. reading tons and tons of old comics)?

I went back and read a lot of the old *Spider-Man* [issues]. I looked at Stan Lee's first year or two of the original series, which I loved. But you don't have to do *too* much work, because they're the ones writing the lines. You're just responsible for the voice and inflection and fine-tuning the way the character delivers the dialogue.

Did you have to work on differentiating between your Peter Parker voice and your Spider-Man voice?

Yeah, they wanted Peter to stammer a little bit more, to sort of reflect his uncomfortable teenage insecurities. But they wanted Spider-Man to be very comfortable with himself.

Has the show been picked up for a second season?

I know [MTV and Marvel Studios are] thinking of releasing a DVD of the first season, so I hope fans like it enough for them to bring it back for a second!

Could you kick Tobey Maguire's ass?

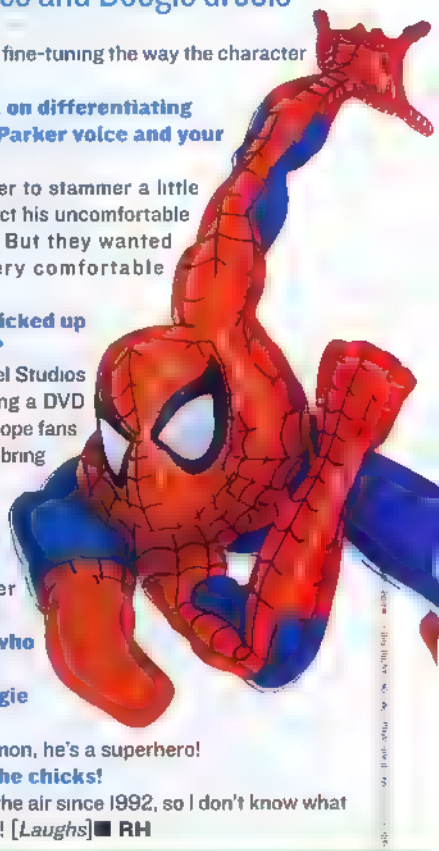
Nah. I'm the computer nerd, he's the real deal!

If you had a choice, who would you rather be: Peter Parker or Doogie Howser?

Parker, man! I mean, c'mon, he's a superhero!

But Doogie gets all the chicks!

Well, Doogie's been off the air since 1992, so I don't know what chicks he's getting now! [*Laughs*]■ **RH**



BEST of 2003

BERRY TASTY We'd "Die" for Halle's Jinx.

DVDelights

2003's DVDs that made us couch potatoes

DVD WE COULD WATCH 100 TIMES: "X2." From cool deleted scenes (Nightcrawler gets vomited on) to insightful Bryan Singer commentary (find out which scene he "borrowed" from "Jaws"), it digitally dazzles for hours.

COOLEST EASTER EGG: After you gleefully view Frank Miller get stabbed with pencils, check out Disc 2 of "Daredevil" where there's a hidden gag reel. In the menu after "Beyond Hell's Kitchen," press Enter, and at the next menu press arrow left, and click on the Elektra sais icon that appears in the lower left. See Ben Affleck defeated by pigeons.

BEST HALLE BERRY APPEARANCE AS A SEXY BADASS CHICK: Sorry "X2" fans, we'll go with the bikini-clad Jinx in "Die Another Day." If Berry's "Catwoman" can approach the sexuality she oozed going toe-to-toe with Bond, then save us a place in line.

BEST TV SHOW: "Smallville—The Complete First Season." The only thing we wish this six-disc set had: deleted scenes from the pilot with the original Ma Kent played by Cynthia Ettinger.

BEST HOW-TO: "Countdown to Wednesday," even though it really has nothing to do with Wednesday. If you wanna break into comics, you'd be hard-pressed to find a DVD as comprehensive as this.

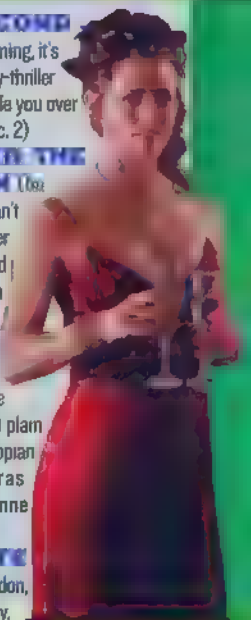
COOLEST SUPERMAN SEQUENCE NOT IN A SUPERMAN MOVIE: "Matrix Reloaded."

BEST SINGLE TV EPISODE ON DVD THIS YEAR: The half-silent "Hush" from "Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fourth Season." See Spike get away with giving the finger, British-style!

BEST INDEPENDENT MOVIE BY A COMIC BOOK ARTIST ABOUT WORLD WAR II HILLBILLIES: Bill Tucci's "Trouble of a Serious Nature"

BEST LOVE-IT-BUT-HATE-IT FLASHBACK: "Challenge of the Super-Friends." On one hand, this late-'70s 'toon gives us golden memories of youth. On the other hand, those same memories implode into a ball of pure cheese. Watch at your own risk. ■ **JOHN B. LACEY**

DVD BUZZ...



ALIAS: SEASON TWO

ALIAS: THE COMPLETE SECOND SEASON With the third season just beginning, it's easy to jump on board Jennifer Garner's sexy spy-thriller 22 episodes, commentary and outtakes will tide you over between new episodes on Sunday nights. (Dec. 2)

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER: THE COMPLETE FIFTH SEASON The series may be over, but that doesn't mean you can't still enjoy it. Season Five will make you drool over the hot-hot-hottie called Glory all season, and move you with the sudden death-death-death of a major character! (Dec. 9)

ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK: SPECIAL EDITION Could there ever be a cooler silver-screen anti-hero than Snake Plissken? Whether you call him Snake or just plain Plissken, John Carpenter's 1981 vision of a dystopian future comes with a second disc of extras. Regrettably, that close-up photo of Adrienne Barbeau's cleavage not included. (Dec. 16)

FIREFLY: THE COMPLETE SERIES Also from "Buffy" creator Joss Whedon, this sci-fi series didn't last very long. Hopefully, when Whedon finishes the "Firefly" film he's reportedly prepping, more fans'll flock to this four-disc set. (Dec. 9)

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN It had to make a good movie on a ride, eh? This DVD release is loaded with a pirate's booty of extras like deleted scenes, documentaries and outtakes. There's even an interactive history on the lives of pirates! Arrrrr! (Dec. 2)

STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE SEASON 7 The "DS9" series wraps up with the mind-blowing, heart-thumping awesomeness that is the Dominion War. This seven-disc set contains the series final 25 episodes considered by most fans to be 24K Trekkie gold! (Dec. 2)

SOUTH PARK

SOUTH PARK: THE COMPLETE THIRD SEASON Season Three features memorable moments like the first appearance of God, the Chinpokomon craze and the Korn/Scooby-Doo spoof. The only thing funnier is the commentary by creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone. (Dec. 16)

LONGEST TITLE OF THE MONTH

LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

While we recommend reading the comic series for the full effect of Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's brilliance, the film nonetheless brings to life these classic lit heroes in Her Majesty's Secret Service. Directed by Stephen Norrington and a screenplay by acclaimed *Starman* writer James Robinson, this DVD comes packed with a myriad of deleted scenes, commentaries and featurettes about the costumes, make-up and special effects (maybe it'll tell us how Nemo's physics-defying sub works). The only bonus feature not included: that on-set smackdown between Norrington and star Sean Connery (shown above). Maybe in a Special Editon. (Dec. 16)

TEAM EFFORT Comic book pros Joe Kelly, Stephen Seagle, Joe Casey and Duncan Rouleau co-wrote Activision's *X-Men: Legends* game.

FROM COMICS TO CONSOLES

Comics' hottest scribes take up video game writing on the side

Comic creators plus video games equals...late comics? Try great games.

Thanks to Activision, some of the hottest writers in comics are trading panels for pixels. Ultimate scribes Mark Millar (*Ultimate Fantastic Four, Ultimates*) and Brian Michael Bendis (*Ultimate Spider-Man, Ultimate X-Men*) recently signed on with the game publisher. While plans are still tippy-top secret, the writers will collaborate on one game as well as write one of their own. All three games will be set in the Marvel Universe.

"When I was a kid, I would always be like, 'Why don't they get Chris Claremont to write the X-Men game?'" recalled Bendis. "It seems like a no-brainer to me. Get the guy. Someone over at Activision decided to get the guys."

As video game writers, Bendis and Millar will craft the overall story of the games and script the scenes between missions.

"When it comes to games, I am Mr. No Patience Man," quipped Bendis. "Hopefully, the scenes will be so interesting people won't just hit the button and fast forward. We're hoping to create a kind of dialogue—a kind of snappiness—that you've never seen before in video games."

And how does writing for video games compare to writing for comics?

For that, we grilled Joe Kelly (*Action Comics, JLA*) and Stephen T. Seagle (*Superman*), who, together with Joe Casey (*Adventures of Superman, Wildcats*) and Duncan Rouleau (*Adventures of Superman*), wrote the script for Activision's upcoming *X-Men: Legends*, developed by Raven Software.

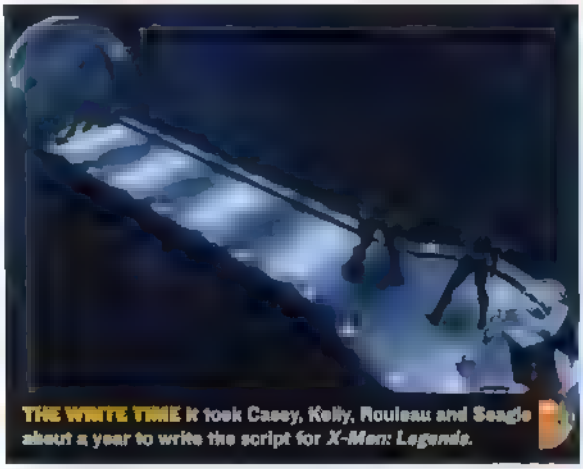
"Video game writing is *huge*!" exclaimed Seagle. "There are so many scenes, and so much branching dialogue, and so many alternate paths through the game that when it's done, the script is just *massive*!"

Writing the game took the quartet nearly a year, although they say the seemingly endless possibilities that arise when writing a video game made it worth while.

"Video games represent a completely different way to tell a story and engage an audience," Kelly explained. "You have to consider an entire world as opposed to just a story. Trying to anticipate the players' desires and what they want to do is a lot of fun."

For Bendis, the prospect of combining the vast

ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN



THE WRITE TIME It took Casey, Kelly, Rouleau and Seagle about a year to write the script for *X-Men: Legends*.

scope of video games with the intimacy of comics has him chomping at the bit.

"Instead of it just being a video game based on a comic, it's going to be an extension of the comic book experience," Bendis said. "We're taking the best aspects of the non-linear game and meshing it with all the character and emotion that makes a great comic."

Even before any of these writers were video game writers, they were video game fans.

"As a kid, video games took up a lot of time, more than comics," Kelly said. "*Tron Deadly Disks* on Intellivision could be the only game I ever owned and I'd be happy. I used to love all of the Intellivision games. I grew up on that system."

X-MEN: LEGENDS

While Seagle revealed his favorite childhood game was the puzzle game *Qix*, Bendis admitted to having slightly more...primal tastes.

"I loved *SmashTV*, where you just killed everything," Bendis exclaimed. "I didn't want to wait around with some story. Get to the bedlam!"

Of course, any good writer knows how important research is, and these writers are doing more than their fair share of game studies.

"I have an Xbox and PS2," said Kelly. "At the moment I'm playing *Simpsons: Hit and Run*, *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Kingdom Hearts*. Oh, and *War of the Monsters* is genius."

Bendis agreed. "*War of the Monsters* is *amazing*! It's like a monster movie, but you can play any of the monsters and you have to fight the other monsters. You can grab helicopters out of the sky and throw it at them. How cool is *that*!"

Lets just hope all the research gets put to good use.

■ DAVE MARSHALL

DIDJA KNOW?

Nightcrawler, the Blob and Iceman will appear in Activision's *X-Men: Legends*.

VIDEO GAME RUMBLINGS

RETURN OF THE KING The film trilogy may be coming to an end, but J.R.R. Tolkien's epic world lives on! With the November release of Electronic Art's *The Return of the King* game stirring up anticipation for the December release of the film, Tolkien fans can look forward to more Lord of the Rings adventures in 2004 with the recently announced *Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-Earth*. The real-time strategy game for the PC allows gamers to further explore the world of Middle-Earth by recreating the stunning battles from the trilogy and controlling the armies of good (or evil!). The battle begins in the summer of 2004.

RETURN OF THE KING

BLOODRAYNE Can't get enough of the sexy vampire huntress from Majesco's action/horror title *BloodRayne*? Watch as director Uwe Boll (who just wrapped filming on "Alone in the Dark," starring Christian Slater and Tara Reid) brings the killer vamp to cinematic life in his next video game film adaptation. Cameras will roll on the bloody action starting in 2004 with an estimated budget of $30 million.

NIGHTSHADE

NIGHTSHADE *Kunoichi* is invading American shores—albeit with a different name. Currently available for the PS2 in Japan, the follow-up to the popular SEGA title, *Shinobi* will be called *Nightshade* when it debuts in the U.S. in early 2004. The action-packed game stars Hibana, a female ninja with killer looks who fights hordes of demonic enemies.

PLAYSTATION 2 Online gamers will be able to upgrade their online experience in March 2004, when Sony releases the PlayStation 2 Hard Disk Drive. Designed to take the online gaming experience to the next level, the internal hard disk drive sports 40 GB of storage and expands on the multimedia capabilities of the PS2 Network Adaptor, with functions like a personal jukebox and downloadable content. Best of all? The drive comes pre-installed with Square Enix's highly-anticipated online title, *Final Fantasy XI*.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE MONTH

HOLLYWOOD HILL!

SILENT HILL

Admit it—you always thought the freaky monsters and spooky environments of *Silent Hill* would make for an awesome scary movie. Well, your nightmare is about to come true! After spawning three popular titles, Konami's blockbuster horror game franchise will take a shot at being a *film* blockbuster, courtesy of Davis Films. Director Cristophe Gans ("Brotherhood of the Wolf") will bring the haunted town of Silent Hill to the silver screen, with Konami overseeing the development of the script and the design of all creatures and characters to ensure an authentic translation of the Hill experience.

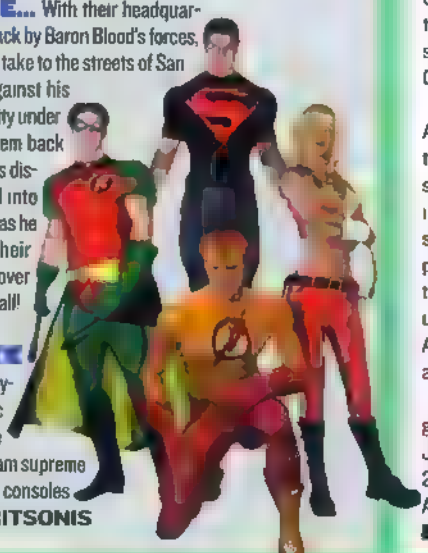
GAMES WE WANNA SEE

TEEN TITANS

THE BOOK Geoff Johns and Mike McKone have brought respectability back to the Teen Titans through engaging storylines that feature a mixture of new members like Impulse and Superboy and older mainstays like Starfire and Cyborg. After all kinds of revamps and roster changes, the Titans—once considered a "Junior JLA"—have come a long way, which bodes well for DC's youngest teams.

THE GAME Those old fighting/adventure games we knew and loved on the SNES and Genesis would be a perfect inspiration for a *Teen Titans* game. But considering the major improvements in graphics and gameplay nowadays, we could see a full-out team fighting game filled with plenty of destructive environments, cool powers and a set of teamwork moves that let you gang up on opponents and cause some serious havoc. Superboy could throw a guy up in the air while Starfire unleashes a starbolt that fries him before he hits the ground, or Impulse could disorient a guy by spinning him around, giving Robin or Cyborg a chance to finish the job with a nice five-hit combo.

JUST IMAGINE... With their headquarters destroyed in an attack by Baron Blood's forces, the Titans are forced to take to the streets of San Francisco and fight against his minions, who have the city under siege. After pushing them back to his fortress, the Titans discover that they played into Blood's hands all along, as he plans to harness all their powers in a bid to take over the world once and for all!



REALITY BYTE Even with the Titans enjoying a successful comic book rebirth, there are no plans for the teen team supreme to jump into video game consoles just yet. ■ TED KRITSONIS

MAGIC 'KINGDOM'

Mickey & Co. get badass in PS2 sequel

Mickey Mouse is known for a lot of things, but kickin' butt isn't one of them.

Well, guess again.

Mickey's badass quotient will double when Square Enix and Disney release *Kingdom Hearts 2*, the sequel to the hit PlayStation 2 game which merged a horde of characters from Disney movies past and present with several *Final Fantasy* regulars in one rousing adventure.

"Our development team is eager to create a new chapter in *Kingdom Hearts* history and determined to deliver an even more unique and exciting gaming experience that will appeal to the global marketplace," said Tetsuya Nomura, director and main character designer of the PS2 series.

The first installment featured Sora, Donald and Goofy defeating the monsters known as Heartless, rescuing the Disney princesses and finding King Mickey. But the game ended abruptly, leaving fans with more questions than answers.

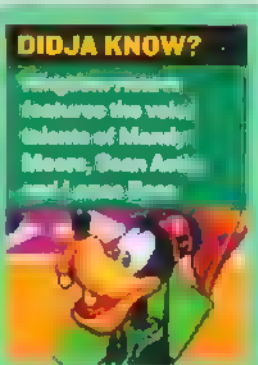
In *Kingdom Hearts 2*, Sora is now a teen, fighting a tougher breed of Heartless, alongside the ageless Donald Duck and Goofy. While no plot details have been revealed, Square Enix admitted Sora's friends Kairi and Riku will return for the sequel. Most importantly, Mickey Mouse himself will fight, at least in the game's cinema scenes, according to footage Square Enix aired at the recent Tokyo Game Show.

Filling in the gap between the two games is Game Boy Advance's *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*. *Chain* will feature the original Sora, Donald and Goofy in 2D battle, and is set immediately after the original PS2 game. Promotional screenshots for the game displayed the Sora crew traveling through The Little Mermaid's undersea kingdom and Aladdin's desert city Agrabah, among other locations.

Both *Kingdom Hearts* games are scheduled for Japanese release sometime in 2004, with an undisclosed American release to follow. ■ ROBERT BRICKEN

DIDJA KNOW?

[redacted] features the voice talents of Mandy Moore, Sean Astin and [redacted]



THE THUNDER YEARS

Manga scribe spotlights Thor's early days in new mini-series

Centuries prior to setting foot in Avengers Mansion and long before he made a habit of smashing villains with his hammer Mjolnir, Thor had another weapon of choice.

But he had to find it first.

It's Thor's quest for a mythical sword that is at the heart of Marvel's six-issue mini-series, *Thor: Son of Asgard*, shipping in March. The series will spotlight Thor's early years and place the young godling in a setting that's more about fighting frost giants than the Masters of Evil.

With the premise set, Marvel needed a writer who knew a thing or two about fantastic epics and myths. Enter Akira Yoshida.

Yoshida's deft handling of the fantasy manga epic *Record of the Lodoss War* and the acclaimed *Nadesico* made him the ideal man to chronicle the early years of Marvel's God of Thunder. Along with artist Greg Tocchini (*Demon Wars*), Yoshida will spin a tale that is more fantasy than superhero, while featuring a number of familiar Asgardian faces.

"Two things that we wanted to see in *Thor: Son of Asgard* were complex relationships between the core team—Balder, Thor and Sif—and an elaborate landscape of Asgard that we would be itching to traverse," described Assistant Editor Mackenzie Cadenhead. "Akira has integrated these two elements so the environment itself has almost become a character that plays into the interpersonal dynamics of the team."

Having been a fan of Marvel comics and Thor since childhood, Yoshida was elated to be part of the project.

"I like the fact that he is a conflicted god who has always had these mythic powers but usually chooses to try and fix all his problems with a big hammer," laughed Yoshida. "But seriously, Thor is probably one of the most complex characters in the Marvel Universe. He is not only a superhero, he is a god!"

Artist Greg Tocchini's work on CrossGen's *Demon Wars* made him no stranger to magic and mysticism, and it also helps that he's been a Thor fanatic since his early days.

"Just the fact that Thor is a god justifies my fascination with the character," gushed the Brazil-based Tocchini. "When I was a little kid, I would pretend to be Captain America and Hawkeye among many others, but never Thor because, to me, no mortal could ever be a god."

A Brazilian artist and a Japanese writer teaming up to work on a Nordic character? It may seem odd, but it makes perfect sense to Cadenhead.

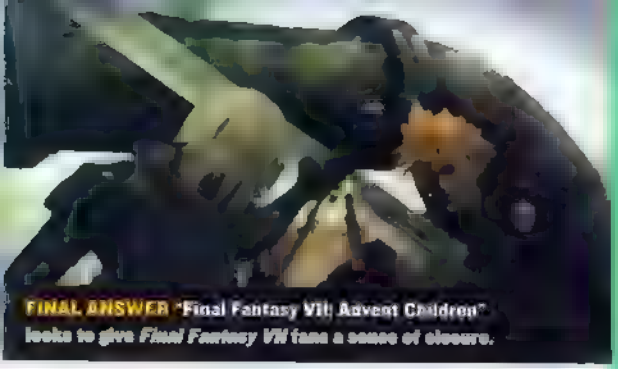
"Though their backgrounds and influences are quite different," explained Cadenhead. "They share an appreciation for Thor that will offer a unique refiguring of the mythos."

Being a Thor fan means Yoshida will be throwing a pantheon of classic villains at the young immortal as he struggles to find the ancient sword. Could a certain mischievous half brother be far behind?

"Loki? Oh yes," teased Yoshida. "But there will be a classic Thor villain involved somewhere down the line and we definitely have a few surprises in store for Thor and his friends—these young gods will get roughed up quite a bit!"

■ TODD CASEY

HAMMER TIME Before Thor had a hammer, he went on a quest for his father's mythical sword in Marvel's *Thor: Son of Asgard*.



FINAL ANSWER "Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children" looks to give *Final Fantasy VII* fans a sense of closure.

FINALLY, FANTASY

'Final Fantasy VII' fans get CG sequel

Fans who played *Final Fantasy VII* got a game that ended with a lot of unanswered questions. But the answers may come now that Square Enix has announced a sequel.

SEPHIROTH

It won't be another video game, though. "Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children" will be an hour-long, straight-to-DVD movie using CG graphics. The characters will look more realistic than in the original 1997 game, much like the "Final Fantasy: Spirits Within" movie. Tetsuya Nomura, who designed the original *FFVII* characters, will direct "Advent Children." The DVD will be released in summer of 2004 in Japan, with an unscheduled U.S. release to follow.

"At this point we do not have in-depth information on the story," explains Sonia Im, Assistant Marketing Communications Manager at Square Enix. "But with Kazushige Kojima [Scenario Writer for *Final Fantasy VII, VIII* and *X*] behind the Scenario Direction for 'Advent Children,' you can count on the same quality and depth of story found in those games."

In the original game's apocalyptic final scene, three forces battled—Meteor, designed to destroy the planet; Holy, designed to save it; and the Lifestream, the spirit of the planet itself. But the game abruptly ended, causing many fans to wonder about the fate of the planet and the main characters.

"Advent Children" is set two years after the events of *FFVII*. Of the little footage Square Enix has shown, main character Cloud returns, along with the evil Sephiroth and a new character that Cloud will fight. A figure, sitting in a wheelchair and covered with a white shroud, has also been seen, causing many fans to hope that Aeris, the heroine who died in the middle of *FFVII*, might be resurrected.

■ ROBERT BRICKEN

DIDJA KNOW?

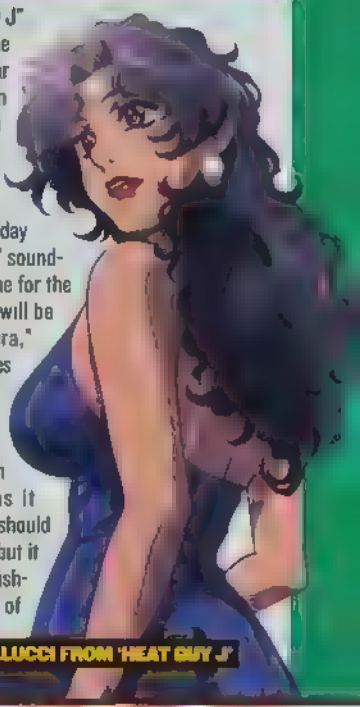
Over 45 million *Final Fantasy* game units have been sold worldwide.

ANIME BUZZBOX

HEAT GUY J The "Heat Guy J" series is slated to appear on the MTV cable network "later this year or early in 2004," according to an announcement made by Geneon Entertainment.

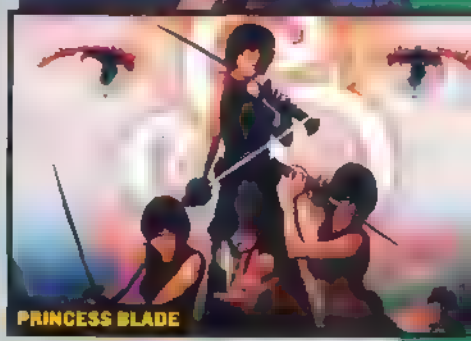
ADV SOUNDTRACKS ADV Films is set to release several CD soundtracks over the holiday season, including three "Nadia" soundtracks for the TV series, and one for the motion picture. Also included will be "Doomed Megalopolis," "Kimera," "Sonic Soldier Borgman" and "Voices of a Distant Star," among others.

GHIBLI FILMS There was much to celebrate at the "Porco Rosso" theatrical screening in Austin, Texas. Not only was it announced that "Porco Rosso" should hit DVD shelves in April 2004, but it was also announced that an English-dub for "Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind" is currently in progress, as is "Whisper of the Heart," a non-Miyazaki Studio Ghibli film.



DR. BELLUCCI FROM 'HEAT GUY J'

PRINCESS BLADE ADV Films has just released the martial arts-packed live action "Princess Blade" on DVD, following critical and commercial success with U.S. and Japanese audiences. The film was released in late summer across the country.



PRINCESS BLADE

INITIAL D PC GAME TOKYOPOP has just announced that they have begun work on an *Initial D* PC driving game, slated for early 2004. The production team, ValuSoft, is also responsible for the *Midnight Outlaw Street Racing* series.

INCENTIVE OF THE MONTH

GTO BOX SET (TOKYOPOP)

Eikichi Onizuka 22, is hardly the kind of person you want to educate your children. He smokes, he's vulgar and unsanitary, he was the former head of a motorcycle gang and he's more interested in how to date the female students than guide them! Still, that makes him the perfect person to teach the hellish students at Holy Forest Academy, who've made a number of teachers quit. One by one, he wins them over with his version of tough love and crazy antics. $99.98

ANIME 101

NEON GENESIS EVANGELION

Despite being eight years since it first aired on Japanese television, "Neon Genesis Evangelion" remains a benchmark for both the giant robot genre and anime itself! Easily the most acclaimed television anime of the 1990s, "Eva" still tops popularity charts with fans in Japan and the U.S. In it, a young teen boy named Shinji Ikari is called by his father to pilot a giant "Evangelion" robot for the organization known as Nerv. Shinji and his fellow pilots battle the invincible Angels, against whom all other conventional weapons are useless. Toss in some experimental animation and it's no wonder the effects of "Evangelion" can still be felt today. Despite having two of the most controversial endings ever (two debatable versions exist, one in the series from ADV Films and the other in the movies from Manga Entertainment), anime fans everywhere should know its name if they haven't seen it already.

■ MIGUEL BETITA

WIZARD ANIME INSIDER

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BEST of 2003

BLANKETS

With a raving fanbase that includes comic stars Brian Michael Bendis and Greg Rucka, this 592-page epic uncovers an intense drama

THE DIRT This quintessential story of growing up and falling in love transcends traditional sequential storytelling with such an outstanding marriage of words, images and raw emotion that it wipes out the competition for the Best Indie Book of 2003.

DOYA LIKE? The timelessness and accessibility of coming-of-age flicks like "Stand By Me" told with the shocking candor of the suburban family exposé "American Beauty"? Then grab a front row seat for *Blankets*!

DIDJA KNOW? Writer/artist Craig Thompson labored in Wisconsin ginseng fields for over 10 years setting up gardens, weeding and harvesting the roots and berries at a time when his small town was the ginseng capital of the world. Also, Tom Cruise presented Thompson with an award in Washington, D.C. for a high school art contest!

WRITER & ARTIST: CRAIG THOMPSON
PUBLISHER: TOP SHELF PRODUCTIONS

It takes a lot of pull to yank comic's best and busiest away from their keyboards or out of the studio—luckily, *Blankets* has 592 pages of weight behind it.

Writer/artist Craig Thompson's follow-up to the acclaimed *Good-Bye Chunky Rice* from Top Shelf Productions rocked the world of indie comics so powerfully that the mainstream couldn't help but feel the aftershocks. From legends like Neil Gaiman to fan-favorites like Brian Michael Bendis, *Blankets* has won acclaim for its engrossing and provocative story told with stunningly rendered illustrations and rhythmic dialogue. Thompson details a traumatic childhood full of bullies, self-doubt and abuse that sent him tumbling headlong into an adolescence and first love he was never prepared for, but would never forget. A coming-of-age tale that stands out as an extroverted display of emotional storytelling, anyone can relate to *Blankets*—from squeaky-voiced teens to nine-to-fivers at the office to the creators slaving over your favorite comic titles.

"There's something so brave about a novel this size coming out as a novel and not as a mini-series," praises *Ultimate Spider-Man* scribe Bendis. "It's just so well-crafted and emotional. It's naked. It's honest, you can just tell. I am so happy people are finding it."

Most people can't relate to having spider-powers or being launched off a dying planet in a rocket, but everyone was once a kid, maybe squabbling with a sibling, wrestling with religious beliefs or divergence with parents and surely falling in love.

"One of the fears with autobiography, or with something so insular and self-focused, is that people won't be able to relate to it because it is so egocentric," says Thompson of his experience constructing the autobiographical epic. "It's been really refreshing to find out that a lot of people are identifying with it."

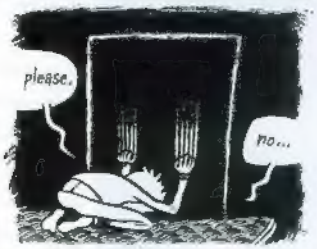
The tale begins with the nighttime exploits of Craig and his brother Phil as kids battling for a blanket during a frigid Wisconsin winter (and shunning it during their sweltering, air conditioning-deprived summers) and spans as far as Thompson's profound yet ephemeral teenage love. *Blankets* chronicles Thompson's emotional development with choice anecdotes and key experiences that firmly ground readers in a story that could be plucked from anyone's life.

In one especially moving sequence, a despondent teenage Thompson finds himself pressed into a void by the relentless taunts of bullies, chastisement from teachers, and admonitions of God's wrath from his parents and church leaders if he continues foolish pursuits like cartooning instead of his faith. His frustration erupts into a fiery blaze when he jams all his artwork into a metal trash barrel and torches it.

Thompson weaves an engaging story by laying everything out in the open so that you can't help but be sucked in. From the shocking abuse he incurred at the hands of a malicious babysitter to his covert abandonment of his parents' devout religious faith, he leaves no page of his personal life unturned—even at the risk of igniting a few bridges.

"My siblings loved [*Blankets*], but my parents were initially enraged by my decision to make aspects of our private life public," reveals Thompson. "It definitely inspired

BLANKET STARE *Blankets* creator Craig Thompson has said he hopes to one day track down his first love, who he based Raina (above) on.



FATHER KNOWS BEST? In a scary sequence, Thompson's father forces brother Phil to sleep in a closet.

discussion that we avoided for a long time, but it was good to get that stuff out on the table."

The crux of Thompson's poignant tale lies with his angelic first love, Raina, who he depicts with an idealized beauty that is an idolization of her character and love itself. His obsession with his conflicts of faith gives way to an obsession with Raina, who becomes his muse and sparks a return to illustration—his other true love.

Blankets itself is a testament to Thompson's adoration of comics as an art form. Like his love for Raina, it begs for reciprocation one can't help but give not just as a fan of the medium a seasoned pro, but as someone who has had to struggle with anything in life.

"It's outstanding work," lauds *Wolverine* and *Wonder Woman* scribe Greg Rucka. "Lyrical, poignant, emotionally brutal and perfectly illustrated. I think it's a rarity, and it substantially raises the bar on autobiographical and semi-autobiographical comics. There are few comics that are as touching and as honest, and as, frankly, real."

THE LAST WORD Craig Thompson exposes his very soul in these 592 pages. You'll find it impossible to put down this epic with its stunning illustrations of love, loss and personal discovery. Don't look at *Blankets* as just the indie book of 2003—it's an essential comic experience. ■ **TODD CASEY**

WANNA PICK UP THIS STORY?

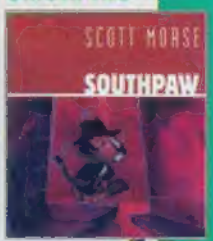
Call 1 888 COMIC-BOOK to find your nearest comic shop, or visit www.topshelfcomix.com to order directly. Do you know about a cool series that deserves the "Secret Stash" treatment? Write to us at "Secret Stash," c/o Wizard Entertainment, 151 Wells Ave., Congers, NY. 10920, or e-mail us at secretstash@wizarduniverse.com.

INDIEBESTS

More of 2003's small press essentials

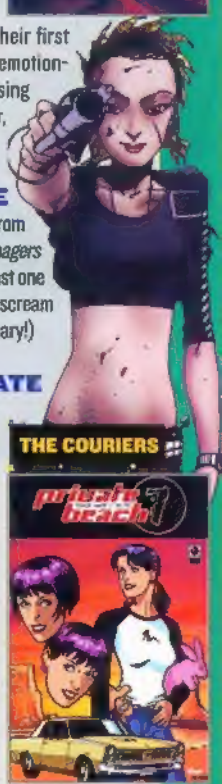
MOST INTENSE ALTERNATE REALITY: YOSSEL (ibooks) Legendary artist Joe Kubert imagines a life that almost was when he tells his life story as it might have unfolded had he grown up in Nazi Germany instead of emigrating to the United States. The poignancy and passion of his raw illustrations make this extraordinary tale one of the most powerful indie comic experiences of the year.

BEST ONGOING SERIES: QUEEN & COUNTRY (Oni Press) Writer Greg Rucka and his rotating crew of artists, including Carla Speed-McNeil (*Finder*) and Jason Alexander (*Empty Zone*), provide a monthly dose of intrigue and espionage with special government agent Tara Chace's Bond-like adventures in this outstanding spy thriller.



BEST BOOK STARRING AN ANTHROPOMORPHIC TIGER: SOUTHPAW (AdHouse Books) Get ready for fur-flying fisticuffs with this pocket-sized book from writer/artist Scott Morse (*Barefoot Serpent*) that follows the exploits of Southpaw, a boxing tiger who's on the run after refusing to throw a match against a malevolent robot. (He had us at "boxing tiger.")

BEST MINI-SERIES: A SORT OF HOMECOMING (Alternative Comics) Writer Damon Hurd and artist Pedro Camello follow up their first acclaimed collaboration, *My Uncle Jeff*, with this emotionally affecting three-issue series about the pain of losing a loved one that, thanks to a light sprinkling of humor, is poignant without being dreary.



BEST ACTION SEQUENCES: THE COURIERS (AiT/Planet Lar) This graphic novel from writer Brian Wood (*Channel Zero*) and artist Rob G (*Teenagers from Mars*), packed with gunplay, car chases and at least one bazooka, is so badass, it'll beat you senseless until you scream "Sequel!" (*Couriers 02: Dirtbike Manifesto* hits in January!)

MOST INTRIGUING MYSTERY: PRIVATE BEACH (Slave Labor Graphics) Writer/artist David Hahn crosses the bizarre surrealism of "Twin Peaks" with slice-of-life stories like Terry Moore's *Strangers in Paradise* in this bi-annual ongoing that follows the whacked-out life of Trudy Honeyvan.

CONCEPT WE WISH WE'D THOUGHT OF: SUPER HERO HAPPY HOUR (Geek Punk) Superheroes boozin' in a bar after a hard day of slapping around villains? Where has this been for past 20 years?! Writer Dan Taylor and artist Chris Fason have a hit with this hilarious series—available in trade this December!

BEST SEND-OFF: BONE #55 (Cartoon Books) This special 48-page issue bids a fond farewell to Jeff Smith's hilarious, all-ages fantasy epic. It's a beautiful finale to an outstanding accomplishment. Don't be a stranger, Smiley! ■ **TC**

BEST of 2003

13 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT BATMAN

Since *Batman* dominated the sales charts throughout most of 2003, we felt it appropriate to give fans a taste of the most obscure Bat-facts we could dredge up from our own Batcave.

1. BOB KANE ADMITS that Leonardo Da Vinci's flying machine influenced his Dark Knight design. He was similarly inspired by the film "The Bat Whispers" (1930), which featured a detective who was secretly a costumed killer called the Bat. He also borrowed from "The Mask of Zorro" (1920), about a wealthy man who used his money to fight crime; even details like the hideout entrance through the grandfather clock carried over.

2. GOTHAM CITY DIDN'T EXIST until 1941. Batman's hometown was first called New York, but Bill Finger felt that the city should have a name that anyone in any city could identify with. He struggled for two years and considered other names, including Civic City, Capital City and Coast City.

3. TALK ABOUT DANGEROUS CURVES. When fitted for her purple costume in the mid-1960s, TV's Batgirl—actress Yvonne Craig—found it flattened her chest. The producers cursed the costume for ruining "two of the reasons we hired Yvonne," according to published reports. The costume was reworked to better display her goods.

4. MARILYN MONROE, when she was still known as Norma Jean Mortenson, spent a day at the beach with Batman creator Bob Kane and posed for sketches.

5. NOTE TO THE GUINNESS BOOK: As of December 2003, Batman has appeared in 4,601 total comic book issues, the most of any character in comic book history, while runner-up Superman has only appeared in 4,472.

6. NOTE TO THE GUINNESS BOOK PART 2: Batman has had a total of 314 different action figures created of him, while runner-up Spider-Man has 200.

7. ARE CIGARETTES BAD? Bob Kane's inspiration for the Penguin's design was a cigarette-toting penguin in a Kool cigarette ad. However, Bat-writer Bill Finger said the character's personality was taken from emperor penguins, who reminded him of stuffy English gentlemen.

8. TIM BURTON IT'S NOT. In 1943, Columbia had the rights to Batman and made a 15-part movie serial, which portrayed Batman as an upper class twit, full of anti-Japanese sentiment. It did however name the Batcave. The second serial also featured Vicki Vale.

9. BATMAN FACED HIS PARENTS' KILLER in *Batman* #47 in June-July 1948. Without proof to convict the killer, Joe Chill, Batman could do nothing. When Chill told his cohorts this, they gunned him down for inspiring their worst enemy's crusade against them. "I guess you got me," groaned Chill as he died in Batman's arms.

10. DEATH BY AT&T! In 1988, fans could choose if the second Robin (a.k.a. Jason Todd) would live or die by calling a 900 number. Death won out by a tight 7-vote margin. The final vote was 5,343 to 5,271.

11. WHY 'BRUCE WAYNE'? Bill Finger named Batman's alter ego after Bob Kane's own name because he noticed that Kane had based the character on his own appearance and kept unusually late hours.

12. HOLY PORNO! In the 1940s, unauthorized pornographic mini-comics titled *Tijuana Bibles* featured some of the biggest cartoon stars of the day, including Batman.

13. SALES DOUBLED with the introduction of Batman's teen sidekick Robin in *Detective Comics* #38.

■ HEIDI WARD

A TIME TO KILL Did you know Bruce Wayne's parents were both murdered at 10:47 p.m.?

EXCLUSIVE

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